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Pro-Christian Humor and the Online Carnival

Abstract

Humor that takes as its comedic object the beliefs, practices, and culture of Christianity has flourished in the digital age via journalistic satire, video sharing, and social network websites. Theory of the comic's use as a moderator between the sacred and the profane provide by Conrad Hyers, and the carnivalesque literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, reminds us that humor made at the expense of elements of Christian doctrine and culture can serve to reify and strengthen Christianity in the United States, a conclusion justified by textual analysis of three websites featuring this material. The analysis supports that an essential rule for successfully blending humor and religion together is to avoid directly leveling the humor at God or at Christianity as a valid religion but rather restricting the ludic treatment to church practices, church culture, and individual behavior. Comments made by readers reveal that a majority approve of the ludic turn, but vehement dissent shows a strong tension between the ludic and the presupposition that religion must remain sacrosanct and solemn. The specific mechanisms that lead from humor at the expense of Christianity to bolstering of Christian belief include inducing humility, providing reflection on one's beliefs and attitudes, offering corrective (termed parabolic) lessons regarding sin and folly, boosting the salience of Christian practices and beliefs, inoculation, and a negative reaction to perceived sacrilege that inspires recommitment to core beliefs. Christian humor is increasingly available and popular, and is fast becoming a constructive alternative mode through which Christians can address, explore, and consider their faith.

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PRO-CHRISTIAN HUMOR AND THE ONLINE
CARNIVAL

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PRO-CHRISTIAN HUMOR AND THE ONLINE CARNIVAL

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to:

My late father, William Arnet, who filled our house with books and shared the joy that stories can provide.

and:

My mother, Melanie Ann, who taught me how to read, to dream, and to never let my troubles get the best of me. Any part of me that is kind, compassionate, and yet impatient with bullshit, I owe to my mother.

but most especially:

My wife, Leticia Marie, the most generous, genuine, and loving partner in life a man could ask for. It is only because of her support that this rather odd mid-life education odyssey has been possible; I would neither have undertaken nor survived it without her. I love her with all that I am, and am continuously amazed that such a remarkable woman loves me back.

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It is my hope that this dissertation, and whatever future contributions I might make to scholarship or the education of others, will do justice to the generosity and brilliance of all of the people whose help I could not have managed without.

ABSTRACT

PRO-CHRISTIAN HUMOR AND THE ONLINE CARNIVAL

Timothy W. Fallis

Dr. John L. Jackson, Jr.

Humor that takes as its comedic object the beliefs, practices, and culture of Christianity has flourished in the digital age via journalistic satire, video sharing, and social network websites. Theory of the comic's use as a moderator between the sacred and the profane provide by Conrad Hyers, and the carnivalesque literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, reminds us that humor made at the expense of elements of Christian doctrine and culture can serve to reify and strengthen Christianity in the United States, a conclusion justified by textual analysis of three websites featuring this material. The analysis supports that an essential rule for successfully blending humor and religion together is to avoid directly leveling the humor at God or at Christianity as a valid religion but rather restricting the ludic treatment to church practices, church culture, and individual behavior. Comments made by readers reveal that a majority approve of the ludic turn, but vehement dissent shows a strong tension between the ludic and the presupposition that religion must remain sacrosanct and solemn. The specific mechanisms that lead from humor at the expense of Christianity to bolstering of Christian belief include inducing humility, providing reflection on one's beliefs and attitudes, offering corrective (termed parabolic) lessons regarding sin and folly, boosting the salience of Christian practices and beliefs, inoculation, and a negative reaction to perceived sacrilege that inspires recommitment to core beliefs. Christian humor is increasingly available and popular, and is fast becoming a constructive alternative mode through which Christians can address, explore, and consider their faith.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Religious Humor in Digital Space

Many argue that digital technology and the digital “sphere” of human interaction that it facilitates, so flexible for both users and producers of content, has the potential to be our society’s best mediating technology for dialog that links the corporate and institutional perspective with community and individual voices in a flattened, democratized fashion (Morozov 2011; Vaidhyathan 2011; Benkler 2005). By “flattened” I mean that individual voices across class, financial status, geography, occupation, and education level have equal capacity to reach target audiences and equal potential to establish an authoritative claim. Scholars frequently argue that this potential is technologically determined, owed to the unique “affordances” of digital technology: wide access, low cost of access, low cost of production, the “open” structure that makes censorship so difficult, and some degree of anonymity.

Technologies, i.e. tools and the skills to use them, can certainly enlarge the realm of what can be accomplished, but in and of themselves they guarantee nothing. What really creates impact are the social practices, cultural norms, and institutions that emerge around these technologies.

I suspect an additional element: permission. Users seem to believe they have permission recognized by their neighbors, their government, their society, their churches, and most importantly *themselves* to use digital space to present, represent, refute, challenge, contest, and experiment with ideas. Perhaps this permission is built into the digital itself, a condition of the digital as it is socially constructed into a unique dialogic realm. Perhaps it springs directly from those technological affordances such as being

inexpensive, easy to use, and a perception of anonymity. One of the ways American Christians are taking part in this liberated digital sphere is by increased use of the ludic mode to approach and consider their faith tradition.

In this dissertation I argue that online religious humor is now a constructive, meaningful, and significant aspect of how American Christians approach, engage with, and seek to understand their faith. Frequently the joke or satire serves as a parable, illustrating some moral or spiritual lesson, and seems to be an important aspect of why ludic treatment of Christianity is valued by audiences. Only occasional is that humor carnivalesque, but Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival theory has proven a useful lens to study online Christian humor for how it attempts to make sense of humor's potential to provide a safe "second space" of engagement in which sacrilege, counter-hierarchy, and transgression can be constructively used as modes that leave religious conviction not only undamaged but strengthened. The question of how ludic treatment can go too far for some believers, becoming unredeemably offensive, is complex; however, the simplest explanation is that it becomes most problematic when it is perceived to be making fun of God or the direct worship of God.

Conrad Hyers, The Sacred and the Profane

This dissertation is not about comedy, and is not meant to contribute to theories of the ludic. It's about how the comic is used, via the digital, in relation to American Christianity, and I address it within the context of prior scholarship. The relationship between religion and humor is a phenomenon theoretically contextualized by two theorists, Conrad Hyers and his work on the relationship between the sacred and the comic, and Mikhail Bakhtin for his carnival theory (which already has comedic theory

baked into it). I argue that the examples of engagement of Christianity through the ludic I present in this dissertation function to provide believers with a constructive mode that bridges the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the corporeal, a means to comfortably address how their lives fall short of spiritual ideals and to approach the unknowable Divine with a reduced sense of fear.

For theory of the relationship between religion and comedy I rely heavily on the work of Conrad Hyers and his 1969 collection of essays *The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic*, in which he showed that the comedic voice had the potential to bridge incongruities between the concerns of everyday life and those of a spiritual nature. Religion, especially organized religions as structured through interpretation of foundational texts, itself is an exercise that attempts to strike careful balance between the ideals of the Divine and the coarse realities of human existence. In that sense comedy is a similar impulse, and like religion means to soften the challenges of life to make it more bearable; the instrument of religion is hope, while the instrument of comedy is mirth, but their purposes intersect in the struggle to cope.

Hyers' perspective recommends comedy's potential for bridging gaps between the realms of religion and secular life, and in this dissertation serves to show how Christians profitably use comedy to support their religious mission: since humor has a common function with a particular aspect of religion (see paragraph above), and positing that for some it is a more approachable mode of relief than spiritual observance, it can serve for some as a middle step between the profane and the sacred. As a mediator between the two, then, Christian humor within the digital can carve out a space in which religious tenets are queried in a comfortable way, and aspects that might seem absurd are aired and

made normative by way of the laughter that follows. “In humor,” observes Hyers, “the unquestioned authority of the sacred is questioned, the superior status of the holy is bracketed, and the radical distance between the sacred and the profane is minimized” (1969).

In reaching for guidance or comfort from the Divine, and trying to live up to a model of morality and grace that our conceptions of the Divine inevitably suggest, we seek to fulfill a yearning rarely satisfied and a standard of living to which we must always fall short. As a consequence, we make of ourselves ridiculous figures whose foolishness can either be interpreted as tragic, comedic, or (and quite commonly) both. The comic figure constructed in Christian humor reminds us of the essential gracelessness of the human condition, a clumsiness that is only intensified in the religious situation.

Not only is our human condition innately comic to some degree, but it becomes even more ludicrous as we vainly strive to imbue our lives with some measure of influence on a Divinity that we can never be certain to have reached, or much less to have persuaded. People actively engaged in the faith practices of their religion are on a quest for grace that can be inspiring even to those who do not believe, but at the same time these efforts are always laced with a taint of futility because the results are never certain. The more vital the issues we seek to address through religion, the greater the slippage between our profane condition and the divine answers we seek. As Hyers writes: “...the awkwardness that is portrayed on a more trivial plan in the endless pratfalls of the clown, the predicaments of the comic hero, or the confusions of the fool reaches its climax as we attempt to deal with matters of ultimate concern” (2008).

While Hyers provides a clear, elegant model of how humor and religion interrelate, it is important to note that Hyers was not addressing humor that is made *about* religion. While he shows how humor and religion have much the same function and can exist in complement to enhance both spiritual and non-spiritual quests, he did not explicate his theories concerning whatever might be unique about using the ludic to *address* religion or the dynamics of considering religion from a comedic point of view.

Bakhtin and the Carnavalesque

For just such a perspective, Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque provides a useful theoretical lens through which to understand the elements of comedy, irreverence, contestation, and experimentation that characterize the nature of Christians' use of digital space. Carnival theory can be applied to describe phenomena that vary in intensity along several axes, including resistance, contestation, vulgarity, transgression, sacrilege, and constructive engagement.

First in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984a) and then further developed in *Rabelais and His World* (1984b), Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term "carnavalesque" as reference to a literary mode that uses humor and profanity to upend, criticize, but then ultimately reify what is culturally dominant within society. The historical "carnival" he identified was a specific time period, typically the week before the pre-Easter season of Lent, during which the church and its clerics were mocked, the lowly were elevated as kings, and kings characterized as fools. Profane language as well as primitive bodily functions were celebrated.

Bakhtin's theory of carnival was generated through his analysis of Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1991, originally c.1532-1564) and "forbidden laughter" in

medieval folk culture (1984b). For Rabelais, liberation and protest involved the free intermingling of bodies and a shameless display of bodily functions including copulation, defecation, the ingestion and expulsion of food, and even labor and birth. It was a celebration of the “lower strata” of the human body, its natural functions, but also the elements of everyday life for “the folk” that had not been elevated to higher status by neither feudal governments nor church. Two principle modes were used: “reverse hierarchy”, a humbling and debunking, even a debasing, of whatever is lofty, as when beggars insulted kings or when laypeople mocked the clergy; and the lowering of all forms of expression or art to a level appreciated by commoners, using their own idiom and drawn from pedestrian experience (Clark & Holquist 1984). Bakhtin identified through his analysis of Rabelais a general division between official and unofficial as a distinction between high and low cultures, a distinction that could be seen in the attitude of each towards laughter: “A boundless world of humorous forms... opposed the official and serious tone of medieval and ecclesiastical and feudal culture (Bakhtin 1984b).

The carnivalesque as an act, an utterance of popular, low humor, celebrated the anarchic elements of humanity and encouraged the temporary “crossing of boundaries” where the class and ideological differences among people were flattened (made less distinct) through use of crude humor. It was also a mode of critique, one that challenged the cultural and political touchstones of the status quo in a way that re-established their value to society by exploring them in counterpoint, thereby discovering anew their useful and positive elements. Bakhtin saw in the carnivalesque a social force that allowed alternative sociopolitical discourse while enjoying protection from the dominant one, thus potentially bringing about cultural transformation.

The essence of Bakhtin's counterintuitive interpretation was that this tradition was tolerated (indeed, sanctioned) by the powerful because the societal chaos that resulted, and even further the dysfunction that participants could see extending into future ruination if left unchecked, actually *strengthened* existing figures of power because the lowly were reminded that the secular lord and the clerical bishop kept order. Literary carnival theory is not directly about this Lenten tradition, but operates on the same principles of authority displacement and criticism that result, intentionally or not, in reifying the legitimacy of that same authority.

Modern carnivalesque theory is applicable beyond the specific medieval tradition that inspired Bakhtin, but operates on the same principles of authority displacement and mocking criticism; it has come to mean a great deal more than the few weeks of bawdy celebration that preceded Lent in the festival calendar of medieval Europe. Bakhtin acknowledges this extension by applying the carnivalesque to occasions of resistance throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance (1984b); many of his interpreters have taken his interest in the form to be a thinly veiled critique of the Soviet system under which he struggled (Dentith 1995; Danow 1991; Booth 1984; Morson & Emerson 1989). The accuracy of this inference is difficult to determine, and in any case is a point tangential to contemporary applications of his theory.

Bakhtin developed his theory of the carnivalesque not merely as way of explicating Rabelais but also as a historical ground for his own, and by contemporary extension our own, engagement with the laughter described by Rabelais (Dentith 1995). Bakhtin argued that carnival and folk culture have been in decline since the eighteenth century (1984b), an arguable point; nevertheless, contemporary scholars argue that the

carnival *principle* is indestructible and continues to reappear as a dialogic mode in human life and culture. It gives a name, the “carnavalesque”, to a range of otherwise dispersed activities and cultural forms that can now be seen to have historical connections within the literary tradition, from Gulliver urinating on the palace in Lilliput (Swift 1996) to a cartoon of Jesus and Muhammad bickering over toilet paper in their shared apartment (JesusandMo.com).

Carnival theory is neither homogenous nor entirely consistent; both as it was constructed by Bakhtin across five decades of writing, and as it has been developed by contemporary scholars, the theory can be taken in a number of directions and tolerates great variation in the intensity of “resistance” implied. “Situating the work of Bakhtin in relation to contemporary literary, theoretical, and philosophical discourse is in no way a straightforward proposition” (Barta et al 2001). The specific forms that carnival takes vary over time and from culture to culture, and some forms exploit the generic power potential of carnival more fully than others. But whatever form it may take, it is not a set of propositions about the world but “...a way of viewing the world; it is not so much a set of views as a ground for vision” (Morson & Emerson 1990).

It is vital not to confuse the *origins* of the theory, i.e. actual carnivals that included nudity and sex and whatever thrill was to be had from celebrating defecation, with the contemporary notion of “the carnivalesque” as a literary *theory* and a *theory of human behavior*. The poop and the genital exposure, the feasting, the lewd, and the general air of bacchanalia are not necessary conditions for a phenomenon to be called carnivalesque. These are manifestations only, specific to the period which Rabelais novelized and Bakhtin analyzed and historicized. For Bakhtin, the grotesque in Rabelais

served as a literary expression of the carnival spirit and incorporated its primary values: incompleteness, ambiguity, becoming, irreverence, non-canonicalism – all that jolts us out of our normal expectations and epistemological complacency (Clark & Holquist 1984). The “carnival sense of the world” is about mocking and dis-crowning, about casting-down, but it does not forment a loss of power; it is a positive gesture, a “...bringing down to Earth and refertilization” (Morson & Emerson 1990). The poop and the urine, the blood and the gluttony, the vulgar and the carnal, are *symbolic* of this refertilization and served to illustrate Bakhtin’s point; they are not required elements of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin’s theory is strategic rather than systematic or tactical, a matter of parodic glancing blows that permit exposure of a cultural system’s antitheses without forcing its guardians to actually confront, or refute, those same antitheses.

Bakhtin extended his carnivalesque idea beyond describing medieval festivals and developed the theory of carnivalized writing: that is, writing which has taken the carnival spirit into itself and thus reproduces, within its own structures and by its own practice, the characteristic inversions, parodies, and critiques of a carnival proper (1984b). Indeed, Bakhtin seemed to believe that in order for popular carnival to become politically effective it must ‘enter’ the institution of literature (Wills 1989). He wrote that only in literature would carnival be elevated to a state of “artistic awareness”, a concept he never fully theorized, but that seems to be the juxtaposition of official and non-official modes of communication. In the final pages of the Rabelais book he relates the concept of “awareness” to “the victory over linguistic dogmatism” (1984b). The power of the carnival to turn things upside down is facilitated by bringing it into dialogic relation to

official forms. It is only by bringing the excluded and carnivalesque into the official realm in a text that the public discourse may be altered (Wills 1989).

Perhaps the most important single element that distinguishes the carnivalesque is that borders – linguistic, cultural, sacred – are transgressed yet not breached, toyed with but not torn down permanently. Bakhtin pits decentralizing energies against hegemonic projects of centralization such as officialdom, the language system, and the cultural tropes we establish collectively as we attach shame to some human practices while we append valor to others. In a given cultural venue such as religious participation, what is typically marginalized such as vulgar speech, engagement with the ludic, the irreverent treatment of sacred traditions/texts/rituals, is brought to the center of discussion. Put in Saussurian (1986) terms, Bakhtin valorizes the anarchizing vitality of *parole* against the ossified rigidities of *langue* by highlighting the subversive force of “carnival” as opposed to the suffocating decorum of official life and style (Stam 1989).

The carnivalesque principle temporarily abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions. In its place a qualitatively different kind of communication, based on “free and familiar contact” (Bakhtin 1984b), is established. Carnival generates a special kind of laughter, or sometimes a more subtle sense of gaiety, that is directed at both the object of humor and the people leveling it. In carnival the laughter has a specific philosophical meaning, a free and critical consciousness that mocks dogmatism and fanaticism. Through carnival, participants are “...freed from the oppression of such gloomy categories as ‘eternal’, ‘immoveable’, ‘absolute’, ‘unchangeable’, and instead are exposed to the gay and free

laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character, with the joy of change and renewal” (Bakhtin 1984b).

In carnival, all that is marginalized and excluded – the sacrilegious, the mad, the scandalous – takes over the center in a liberating explosion of “otherness”. Festive laughter becomes a symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that oppresses and restricts even when (*especially* when) the restrictive system (e.g. religion) is one which the carnival participant chooses to include in his/her life and in other situations will vigorously defend. According to Bakhtin, healthy parody does not undermine a hero or his exploits, it parodies only the trappings of his heroization; “The genre itself is put in cheerfully irreverent quotation marks” (1984a). As Morson (1990), argues, this sort of parody can generate true, relateable heroes, who are heroic because they embody more possibilities for growth and change than can be encompassed in any single genre especially a genre as long codified and rigid as ecclesiastical Christianity. The serious word is not discredited, though; it is complemented and supplemented, strengthened, and presented within a more authentic context via its ludic treatment.

The carnivalesque, in the larger and more contemporary sense in which the notion is deployed, is more than a party or a festival: it is an oppositional gesture of someone whose expression is somehow circumscribed (even if by choice), a countermodel of cultural production and a reflection of desires that deviate from the specific system addressed. However: it would be a mistake, as Stallybrass and White (1986) point out, to see carnival as intrinsically radical or intrinsically conservative. Often it is simply a view of the official world as seen from below, ranging in intensity from a mere disruption of etiquette to a symbolic overthrow of oppressive social structures. On one hand, it is

something of an ecstatic, joyful affirmation of change and liberation, a dress rehearsal for a utopian paradise. On the other, it is a demystificatory instrument of everything in the social formation which thwarts the utopian ideal: class hierarchy, sexual repression, patriarchy, dogmatism, and paranoia (see Stam 1989, Pechey 2007).

Laughter is a vital element of the liberating aspect of the carnivalesque; laughter makes us free because it provides, according to Bakhtin, the most fearless way to view the world realistically. It “demolishes fear and piety before an object” and is thus “a vital factor is laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically” (1984b). Carnival laughter’s gift is realism, which delivers objects into “the fearless hands of investigative experiment” (1984b).

It would seem to follow, then, that the most fundamental and responsible relation to the objects of this world is a comic one, and that the primary way to be “realistic” about the world, both as a scientist and as a cultural participant, is to laugh at it (Morson & Emerson 1990). “Laughing truth” is valuable, Bakhtin argues, not because it conveys a concrete sense of ideas but because it never worships, commands, or begs. For this reason, it can banish fear, terror, and guilt, offering an unofficial truth. “Laughter is essentially not an external but an internal form or truth”; it frees people “...to a certain extent from censorship, oppression, and the stake” not by eliminatin of those realities but by liberating people from “the great interior censor, from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power” (1984a).

Bakhtin's notions of the critical power of laughter are central to supporting my argument that intentional use of the ludic within digital space permits contestation and facilitates examination of ideology and behavior. He explains it best himself:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. (1981)

The carnivalesque allows "subjects to enter a liminal realm of freedom and . . . create a space for critique that would otherwise not be possible in 'normal' society" (Bruner 2005). Often consistent with this idea in function, and occasionally in form, religious humor in digital space echoes the carnivalesque in that it encourages the viewer to look at religious dogma, motifs, and social impact through an alternative system of evaluation. That evaluation reveals not only the new perspectives on Christianity, but also that audiences have the liberty to choose the perspective through which they understand their own realities. Through the ludic, audiences are able to understand their faith not only through a historically encrusted and formal frame propped up by an established ecclesiastical elite, but also can engage with more pedestrian, perhaps more approachable, ways of thinking about religious belief and practice. This, in turn, allows "audience members to substitute alternative codes for those that may have previously dictated their actions and perspectives" (Danow 1991).

According to Bakhtin the carnivalesque is a purely popular phenomenon that can nevertheless be appropriated by authorities (1984b). This aspect of his theory places him

squarely within the debate over the blurring line between producer and user of mediated content within the digital, where professional content is repurposed by amateurs and trends in amateur production are adopted by professionals (Shirkey 2008; Jenkins 2006; Benkler 2005). “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it” (Bakhtin, 1984b); just so, internet users are participants fully vested not only in appreciation or “use” of digital content but also in its production, modification, and purposing. Within the digital sphere there is decreasing distance between media/messaging professionals and their audiences, just as within the carnivalesque mode; as Bakhtin observed, “in carnival the line between actor and audience member blurs” (1984a).

Stallybrass and White (1986) argue that the literary carnival doesn't possess the same social force as the actual carnival may once have had. Displaced from the public sphere to the bourgeois home (and the increasingly secularized church), carnival ceases to be site of actual struggle. Rather, the carnivalesque is a “second space” where the status differences between people are flattened by way of opening up rights and modes of expression (Kim 2004). Because the carnivalesque is a social force that allows any viewpoint to enter into sociopolitical discourse loosed from normative standards of propriety, it is for Bakhtin capable of bringing about cultural transformation. It is precisely this sense of the carnivalesque, a mode which allows contestation and dialog and permits a level of free expression not available within the critiqued system, that I apply as an analytic device to the use of humor within American Christianity.

In addition to being an explanatory model for functions of religious humor, I argue that the digital sphere can constitute a carnivalesque *space*, the time outside time that Bakhtin described, “a second life of the people, who for a time enter the utopian

realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (1984b). The language that people speak is altered, to allow a familiarity and profanity that is sometimes considered inappropriate in more traditional spaces. Users take on altered identities that are sometimes markedly distinct from their presentation in corporeal life, sometimes even taking on virtual “avatars” that present a unique representation of their physical body, and can participate in cultural activities that are entirely removed from their non-digital lives. The digital can be quite literally, to whatever degree seems good to the particular user, a “second space” for a second life. The carnival spirit offers a liberation from “all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (1984b), and Bakhtin, perhaps in a glance at Freud (Dentith 1995), even suggests that it liberates people “not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor” (Bakhtin 1984b).

In my study the digital is imagined as a modern manifestation of what Bakhtin meant by the “carnival”, a place in which anything can be tested and explored with potentially few ramifications on one’s corporeal life. It is the ultimate “second life of the people”, a parallel environment where bodies are shed and unfamiliar identities are oftentimes assumed (Killoran 2005). The digital indeed provides an additional “second” space where users are able to lead a parallel life that either complements their corporeal lives or diverges from them to whatever degree is desired. Alternative lifestyles and identities are explored through avatars (Connelly 2013; Straarup 2012; Hojsgaard 2005), alternative ideologies are explored remotely without having to make commitments or betray existing allegiances (Musa & Ahmadu 2012; Benkler 2005), and expressive modes that may be risky in the non-digital (henceforth “corporeal”) world are tested in a safe environment at little cost (Jenkins 2006; Brasher 2001). “If the ancient, religious carnival

was limited in time, the modern mass-carnival is limited in space; it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or framed by the television screen” (Eco 1984). That space is now extended by and into the digital sphere, and thus the old temporal limits of Bakhtin’s original formulation of the carnivalesque have been completely eliminated.

I proceed from an understanding of carnival as a constructive exercise rather than a destructive one, agreeing with Umberto Eco that “It is wrong to see carnival as subversive” (1984)¹. In order for the ludic element of carnival to actually be funny, to be transgressive, we must be reminded of the rule in the first place, and often the reason(s) for its existence; the exercise is therefore as much one of reinforcement as it is one of creating comedic perspective.

Carnival, in order to be enjoyed, requires that rules and rituals be parodied, and that these rules and rituals already be recognized and respected. One must know to what degree certain behaviors are forbidden, and must feel the majesty of the forbidding norm, to appreciate their transgression. Without a valid law to break, carnival is impossible. Eco 1984

Further, carnival can only exist as an *authorized* transgression, authorized either explicitly or tacitly; this was true in medieval times when the church and the liege carved out time for the carnival festival itself, and it is true now whether the permission is given by churches that allow comedians to perform in their sanctuaries or individual believers accept the license implied through online forums populated by their fellows.

Research Questions, in Context

¹ The powerful have always permitted circuses as a way to channel popular rebellion, “...just as the contemporary mass media, instruments of social control, operate a ‘continuous carnivalization of life’” (Eco CITE).

Of course the boundaries between humans' spiritual lives and their physical ones are porous. The issues addressed via religious humor in the digital world come from non-digital life, and the constructions built up in the digital world are used to inform solutions and perspectives to those same issues within corporeal life. Christian humor in digital space, now performed 24 hours a day, have evolved into a vibrant part of identifying, negotiating, and defining numerous aspects of Christian culture and social interaction.

Because the boundaries between comic and sacred treatments of a topic are undefined, it is often difficult to tell where the former ends and the latter begins (and vice-versa). There is no clear point beyond which the issue being treated/considered within a ludic framework can no longer be safely (not to mention accurately, or even usefully) reconciled with its real-world referent, subject as the latter is to standards of propriety (be they established by law, church, family, or societal convention) that are only temporarily suspended while being considered comically within a permitted (frequently a digital) space (Shouse & Fraley 2010; Martin & Renegar 2007; Bishop 1990). In the corporeal world those standards, especially as they concern those (self-) appointed to police norms dictated by spiritual belief or religious organization, are often jealously guarded towards maintaining adherence to both dogma and tradition.

Identifying strategies of negotiating that point, and calculating how best to deploy comic treatment of Christianity within of digital space to the advantage of one's ideology without compromising an audience's inclination to take it seriously, are central concerns of this dissertation. If the comic method, i.e. mocking something in order to ultimately reinforce its authority, is essentially a method of persuasion, how can its effectiveness be maximized without offending those the strategy is meant to persuade?

In this dissertation I describe and analyze the complicated calculus of Christian religious humor by way of examining varied attempts to integrate humor and religion together in a contested and seemingly secular world. While I could focus on any of a number of social movements that might use ludic strategies to illustrate their ideology and grapple with its cultural implications, this study is undertaken with the intent of contributing to scholarship concerning how the ludic, via the digital, is transforming the practice of religion. Religion itself is perhaps the oldest method humans have used to organize themselves and their relationship to the rest of existence; as such it is a foundational driver both of history and of contemporary life and culture. Its significance as an aspect of who we are, what we do, how we relate to each other, and how we establish the moral borders of social life cannot be overstated. Today, religion generally and American Christianity² particularly are being transformed as the nexus of spiritual practice and spiritual authority for many is moving from physical churches to online virtual sites (see *Digital Religion*). This is an enormous turn in Christian practice analogous to the shift occasioned by the Protestant Reformation, of encountering the tradition through Bible study and personal prayer rather than from clerical interpretation and formal rite. This shift is rapidly changing a grounding principle of social life in ways that are unpredictable as lay believers, ordained clerics, and institutions grapple with how to include the digital in an engaging, satisfying, and authentic way. Because the increase

² I use the term “American Christianity” in this study as a shorthand to denote “Christianity as it is practiced/observed/mediated in the United States”. Two points are implied in the use of this term: 1) This study is restricted to studying the carnivalesque as a phenomenon within Christianity as it is practiced in the United States only, and 2) I proceed from the (presumably) consensual assumption that, as a cultural sensibility and practice, the observance and expression of Christianity in the United States is just as distinct from how it is “done” in other countries as any other culturally inflected practice is likely to be, regardless of the commonalities and historical bases Christian practice shares with its expression in other lands.

in mediated Christian humor is part of this shift, this study contributes to our understanding of the contingencies believers and clerics consider as they work out how best to negotiate it.

I identify the contemporary Christian use of ludic strategies by examining Christian humor created by Christians as an active mode of maintaining, defending, and strengthening their religious tradition and personal faith. Among those taking advantage of the “second-space” nature of the digital the stakes are perhaps highest for religious practitioners: they are keen to advance their ideology, but must be careful not to go too far with the ludic and risk compromising their core message by straying into blasphemy or hypocrisy. Perhaps worse, overuse of the ludic could potentially reduce religion to just another example of entertainment, no different from any secular amusement, bereft of any sense of sanctity. I have selected Christianity rather than another faith tradition because it is the most common religion in the United States and an integral part of the Western culture³ that gave rise to digital media. A focus on how religion is combined with the ludic is consistent with Bakhtin’s original theorizations of the carnivalesque: since the original carnival tradition suspended reverence in order to illustrate the instability of society without it, a counterintuitive strategy that nevertheless reaffirmed faith through ludic challenge (Bakhtin 1984b), it is appropriate to examine how modern religionists use the ludic, within the liberated atmosphere of digital space, as a stratagem serving a very similar purpose. Contemporary Christianity offers a rich archive of expression deployed across many types of sites, and by a large group of people who

³ In the interests of investigator disclosure: I was raised in a very Catholic family, attended Catholic grade school, and served as an “altar boy” for 7 years. In my twenties I moved away from the church, but in the last decade or so have returned. In the doctrinal sense I am a terrible Catholic, but I choose to believe in God and manage to get myself to mass quite frequently.

represent a wide range of Christian denominations, flavors of dogma, and intensities of belief.

Christianity – certainly as a set of institutions but more as a set of beliefs, a set of ritual practices, a moral code, a lifestyle – is advanced and maintained within and through media (Hoover & Lundby 1997; Hoover 2006; deVries & Weber 2001). ‘Twas always thus: for Christians the Bible is held to be the medium through which God transmits his word to human beings; prayer is the medium through which believers communicate their entreaties to God. The sermon and the service mediate between church and congregation. Even church architecture communicates a sense of grandeur, majesty, and power. Christianity has been quick to make use of new mediating technologies to proselytize its message: the first books printed with moveable type were Bibles (Man 2002); among the pioneers of national radio shows were the Catholic Father Coughlin (Warren 1996) and Foursquare founder Amy Semple McPherson (Hangen 2001; Epstein 1994); and television became an evangelistic medium with early adopters Fulton J. Sheen, Rex Humbard, and Oral Roberts (Hadden & Shupe 1988).

The digital realm, accessed through a number of device-types but technologically located within the networked computers that comprise the internet, also mediates Christianity (2012; Cheong, Fisscher-Nielsen, Gelfgren, & Ess 2012). It is the site of virtual churches, some of them complete with digitally hosted services “attended” by the avatars of the disembodied congregation (Hutchings 2013; Lundby 2012; Hojsgaard 2005). It hosts many scripture archives (e.g. biblegateway.com, bible.com, bible.org), church websites (e.g. vatican.va, thefoothillschurch.org, stmarysatpenn.org), and discussion boards (e.g. religiousforums.com, debatingchristianity.com, govteen.com).

One can participate in religious debate, watch a video of a sermon, and take online scriptural instruction online; in short, Christians have been quick to render nearly every function of Christian practice and culture available through digital technology. Some of these sites and communities use humor to project their faith through and within the digital realm. A number of these will be of concern to this dissertation.

Method

There are many sites of pro-Christian Christian humor, but in order to facilitate deep analysis I only examine a few in this dissertation. Some of the more popular sites on the internet involve parody news (theOnion.com was ranked the 730th most popular U.S. website in 2012 [alexa.com]), video sharing (YouTube was 3rd), and social media (Facebook was 1st); each of my three case studies examines a Christian website devoted to one of these three formats. The parody news site I have selected is LarkNews.com, an online Christian satirical newspaper styled very much like The Onion. Next is the Christian video hosting site GodTube.com, one of whose ten channels is devoted to comedy. The third site is GodJokes, a page within Facebook that delivers Christian-themed and “family oriented” humor to its subscribers. These foci provide a snapshot of the digital sphere that demonstrates how it functions to facilitate Christian humor, and showcase some of the strategies used by Christian groups to negotiate a balance between the affirming potential of the ludic and the imperative to protect ideological integrity.

The primary method of this dissertation is a careful textual analysis of the content of each site, operating under the assumption that the strategies of Christian humor producers are most accurately reflected in the content they post. I examine the articles, videos, and jokes of these three sites to find answers, deducing the decisions that went

into particular postings and noting the limits that producers have placed on themselves in particular pieces. I note what elements of both Christian and secular culture are included in the piece, and what elements are conspicuously absent. I pay special attention to the topic of each example in the interest of learning what these content producers are comfortable addressing, and attempt to identify the potential effects each post might have on a Christian audience. I have been leery of ascribing authorial intent, however, except in those cases in which the author has somehow explicitly stated it. In addition to learning the limits of Christian humor on each site, I attempt to identify specific mechanisms that allow audiences to feel that their religious beliefs/culture are supported by critical comedy rather than threatened by it.

Because of differences in their content, the protocol for choosing which articles (LarkNews), videos (GodTube), or postings (God Jokes) to include in the sample varies somewhat by site. For LarkNews I primarily use something of a “snowball” approach. On the first day of the study I went to the site and read the articles featured on the home page that day; then, I clicked on the top story headline listed under “recent articles” and read that story when it came up. When done with that one, I read the top selection from the new “recent articles” menu presented; if I had already read that story, I clicked on the second title or the third (etc.) as necessary. In those cases where I had already covered all the articles listed under the “recent articles” heading, I substituted the article number in the URL with a random number⁴ within the range I had observed the site using (i.e. 1 –

⁴ The random-number-entry method did not always yield a new article, but it did provide a new “recent articles” list. The LarkNews numbering system is not intuitive; when I asked author Joel Kilpatrick to explain it he just laughed. The site is thorough, though; whenever a number that does not reference an article is entered, the following message is displayed:

The Page Cannot Be Found possible causes:

- *Baptist explanation: There must be sin in your life. Everyone else opened it fine.*

5000) and read that article, then renewed the “recent articles” protocol. I stopped at 302 articles, having 1) covered articles from the first months of LarkNews’ operation until the present year, and 2) having seemingly exhausted the topical range of the site.

For the GodTube comedy channel I viewed every video offered under the sort parameters “most popular” and “all”. “Most popular” is a quantitative parameter relative to “most recent”, “view count”, “rating”; “all” is a temporal parameter relative to “today”, “this week”, “this month”, “this year”. These sort parameters produced the longest list of videos, hence the largest and most comprehensive sample, and those that showed what GodTube has offered over the longest period of time. For the Facebook page Christian Humor / God Jokes I simply read every posting available in the archive, from December 21 2013 back to October 14 2011. Choosing which articles, videos, and postings to explicate in the body of this dissertation has by nature been a subjective decision. I have highlighted those stories that feature the widest range of topics and the full breadth of how the ludic is used to address Christianity.

The secondary method of this study involves interviews with two providers of Christian humor. I had hoped to include each site’s editorial decision-maker in an effort to understand how s/he determines what is appropriate content for the respective outlet;

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- *Presbyterian explanation: It's not God's will for you to open this link.*
 - *Word of Faith explanation: You lack the faith to open this link. Your negative words have prevented you from realizing this link's fulfillment.*
 - *Charismatic explanation: Thou art loosed! Be commanded to OPEN!*
 - *Unitarian explanation: All links are equal, so if this link doesn't work for you, feel free to experiment with other links that might bring you joy and fulfillment.*
 - *Buddhist explanation:*
 - *Episcopalian explanation: Are you saying you have something against homosexuals?*
 - *Christian Science explanation: There really is no link.*
 - *Atheist explanation: The only reason you think this link exists is because you needed to invent it.*
 - *Church counselor's explanation: And what did you feel when the link would not open?*

however, after nearly two years of attempting to contact those persons only Joel Kilpatrick, the founder and principle writer for LarkNews, even acknowledged my entreaties⁵. Mr. Kilpatrick spent nearly two hours with my by phone and exchanged numerous emails; I am grateful for his assistance. Unable to obtain an interview with a representative of GodTube I attempted to contact comics whose performance videos are found on that service, and was rewarded with correspondence from Bob Smiley who kindly answered questions via email. The insight both shared with me has contributed to understanding Christian humor from a producer's perspective and served to refine and test the deductions I made from analyzing the various Christian humor texts.

Additionally, I have included information pertinent to this study from whatever sources are available and seemed germane. In addition to the texts of articles, videos, and postings I learned whatever I could from the "about" and "disclosure" pages of the studies websites, biographies of producers, interviews with producers conducted by journalists, one of Joel Kilpatrick's books, and user comments. In this way my approach is inspired by the epistemological philosophies of Clifford (1988) who encourages the idea of "ethnography as collage". This approach has resulted in an assemblage of data taken from multiple angles and perspectives that ultimately serves to illuminate the complex topic of Christian humor and provide a broad framework from which to derive useful theory.

This is a qualitative study that uses qualitative methods. Since I can't explicate every example of Christian humor included in the sample, however, in appendices I have

⁵ Contact was attempted via email for LarkNews (no phone number could be discovered), email and phone for GodTube's parent company Salem News Network, and via instant message (no other method being available) for the God Jokes Facebook page. Attempts to gain audience or correspondence began September 2012 and continued monthly until February 2014.

provided some very simple quantitative data in order to provide a more complete picture of the content that populates these three websites. For each I have compiled the information that best communicates what these sites offer, although the topics addressed and their frequency is included for all three websites.

For the purposes of this study, “religion” shall mean any system of faith or practice (or both) relating to an acknowledged ultimate reality or deity that is significant to devotees and not objectively demonstrable. “Humor” shall mean communicated ideas that are intended and/or found to be comic or absurd, either eliciting mirth and amusement and possibly including critical consideration of the idea’s object. “Religious humor” shall be jokes or anecdotes intended to either make fun of or satirize (i.e. critique by way of the ludic) any religious institution, deity, clergy, believer, belief, practice, pronouncement, influence, history, scandal, cultural motif, or anything else that takes as its object anything relating to religion. Religious humor can be constructed from both anti-religious and pro-religious positions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Very little scholarship specifically addresses the use of humor as an expression of faith or a mode of addressing faith, nor has work been done deploying comic theory concerning how religion is mediated by the digital. This literature review will show how carnival theory has been used, how that body of scholarship informs this study, how I intend to use it and document that this present work addresses an unmet need.

Scholarly Applications of Carnival Theory

That the digital sphere constitutes a carnivalesque space is supported by a study of Chinese internet users, which finds that “The relationship between ‘the establishment’ and ordinary people is changed in the online carnival” (Herold 2012). Herold found that Chinese cyberspace is a “fun place” where “normal rules don’t apply”, but crucially “the existence of the online carnival does not invalidate the rules of ‘normal’ space”. As Bakhtin wrote:

It could be said (with certain reservations, of course) that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, *two lives*: one was the *official* life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reference, and piety; the other was the *life of the carnival square*, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter. (1984a)

Just so, Chinese cyberspace “offers entertainment, freedom from rules, universal good will, etc., in contrast to the oppressive reality of people’s lives” (Herold 2012). It is a place where the powerful interact with ordinary people and the young, where leaders are mocked and held accountable for their offline actions, and distance between the official philosophies of the society and the realities of citizens’ lives is temporarily suspended. The author finds that this separation between the online and offline lives is thought by users to be so profound, in fact, that users have a difficult time appreciating both how online existence can affect offline life and that online activities can be just as “real”, and significant, as those undertaken offline.

I find no such disconnect regarding how Christians view the relationship between online and offline activities, but I do find the same sense that offline life is a free space that provides significant liberty from the rules of offline institutions. Christian humorists

and their audiences behave as though the online world affords them a distinct permission to express themselves in alternative, potentially transgressive, and simply “fun” ways they might not feel comfortable expressing in offline forums.

Scholars are divided over whether the carnivalesque can cause political or social change or is itself a result of such change. Eco (1984), Hoy (1994), Sobchak (1996), and Gray (2006) have come down on the side of denying that genuine social change is effected by carnival. By contrast, Janack (2005, 2006) has concluded that the effect of carnival on political change is unclear. Lachmann (1988) and Bauman (2004) argue that while carnival may not actually change anything, it may enable observers to understand official ideology better and subvert the fear often used by official institutions to increase their hegemony (see also Karimova & Shirkhanbeik 2012 concerning the carnivalesque and the metaphysics of change).

The popular parody news television program *The Colbert* uses laughter *Report* (Meddaugh 2010) to position individuals as insiders within the institutional structures being examined. *Colbert* as carnival challenges institutional claims to authority concerning truth and appropriate mode of discourse, and as such is an effective agent demonstrating the shortcomings of both American politics and the media establishment that reports on it. *Colbert* is an example of how carnival laughter can position audiences as insiders rather than as outsiders to traditional discourse, thus able to challenge the normative values of traditional modes of communication. LarkNews.com, one of this dissertation’s three case studies, is a parody Christian news site that also uses laughter to position individuals as *inside* the institutional structures of the Christian faith. Just as *The Colbert Report* does not intend the overthrow of the American government or media

institutions but rather seeks more informed engagement with both, LarkNews uses the the ludic to ultimately enhance its readers' connection to both social and dogmatic elements of the Christian tradition in America.

Whether consciously or not, producers of Christian humor in digital space are claiming agency to challenge traditional (and patriarchal) church mediation of the tenets of Christianity, an element of resistance within their practice that is firmly part of the carnivalesque. Langman (2008) observes that, for many, “the mass-mediated commodified culture is superficial and inauthentic”, and as a result inspires resistance. She argues that the current popularity of tattoos and piercings, punk and heavy metal music, and what she calls “porn chic” can be understood as a carnivalesque way of “claiming agency to resist domination, invert disciplinary codes, and experience ‘utopian moments’”; each is a critique of patriarchal codes of morality and codified norms of authenticity⁶. Although Christians’ uses of humor are not meant to subvert but rather to abet Christian ideology, Langman’s analytic is useful for problematizing their choice of method; there *is* a detectable undercurrent of resistance in their choice to express their faith through jokes, cartoons, and mockery of church dogmatics. By choosing the ludic, they are in some sense protesting the customary reverent and staid nature of Christian strategies of teaching ideology and morals, substituting those styles with one that seems more authentically tied to the lives believers lead within an increasingly secular society.

The people using humor and irreverence to support Christianity online are walking a tightrope of effective use of the ludic, risking a fall into self-inflicted

⁶ See Halnon 2006 for a similar argument concerning heavy metal music, and Kohl 1993 concerning rock ‘n roll generally, as well as Radwan 2006 and Beaudoin 1998 for arguments that popular music culture provides young people with resources for constructing their religious identities in oppositional fashion.

ignominy, just as Jesse Ventura did when he used the technique in his gubernatorial campaign. Janack (2006) argues that the successful 1998 campaign of Jesse Ventura is best understood as a successful use of the carnivalesque to forge a “fellow common-man” bond with the Minnesota electorate. Ventura traded heavily on his past as a Navy SEAL, professional wrestler, and film actor throughout the campaign, breaking numerous normative codes for how a political candidate should behave. One of his commercials featured his impressive physique nude in Rodin’s “thinker” position (his character name as a wrestler was “The Body”); he also bragged about his many dalliances with women, and quoted his “Predator” (1987) film character when he described himself as a “sexual tyrannosaurus”. He used coarse, ludic language and images to create a carnivalesque “Jesse Ventura text” that re-formed (he would say “reformed”) voters’ notion of what a politician could credibly represent. That he was elected governor makes his an important example of careful, successful negotiation of the carnivalesque, using it effectively but not going so far with it as to be dismissed as a buffoon. However, Ventura’s example offers an important coda that neatly closes the carnivalesque loop: sensing that after nearly four years the Minnesota electorate had tired of his schtick (polling data suggested he’d lose) and was ready for a more traditional state administrator, Ventura chose not to seek reelection. His unconventional political style had reminded voters of the valuable traits of a traditional politician and inspired them to return to someone who exemplified conventional modes of leadership (see also Janack 2005 for a similar argument concerning the political behavior of Russia’s Vladimir Zhironovsky).

The inversion of traditional bases of power constituted by the “Tea Party” and its standard-bearer Sarah Palin can also be analyzed as a carnivalesque phenomenon. As in

Bakhtin's description of the original practices related to carnival, Palin invokes the instinctual nature of the body, specifically the body of a mother, as an argument that one needs no formal training to have a say in America any more than you need it to be a good mother. Her endorsement of 3 "mama grizzly" candidates in the 2010 midterms again used the motherhood trope, likening these women to an animal that "would instinctively rear up on her hind legs when her cubs were threatened" (Wideman 2011). Palin's continued reference to motherhood, childbirth, and decision making are in direct contrast to traditional hegemonic conceptions of what constitutes experience for political office (Wideman 2011). Palin's approach is an example of inversion, wherein she is the lead jester in a Tea Party of jesters, influencing the agenda of the more king-like (established and powerful) Republican Party.

By using the ludic as a mode with which to express their message, Christians are taking advantage of a connection between laughter and ethical commitment to social justice. Hall (2011) has analyzed the motivations of the title character in the *Harry Potter* books and come to the conclusion that what Bakhtin identifies as the three essential elements of laughter ("universalism, freedom, and... [their] relation to the people's unofficial truth" [Bakhtin 1984b]), perfectly characterize Harry's view of what is good and right. Harry initiates change by working within the carnivalesque to (among other projects) illustrate the "...subversive qualities of laughter in opposition to the official culture the muggle⁷ world represents with regards to race" (Hall 2011). Consistent with Bakhtin's observations, the series is in part an appeal to social transformation through the power of laughter.

⁷ In the *Harry Potter* universe, the racial divide is not demarcated by pigment or ethnicity but rather between those who have magical abilities and those who do not (the latter derisively referred to as "muggles").

Christian humor in digital space, especially the parody news site LarkNews but also via the videos offered on GodTube, represents challenge to traditional, ecclesiastical narrative presentations of Christian theology and tradition similar to those identified in film. The 1998 film “The Big Lebowski” constitutes a carnivalesque social critique by way of its grotesque realism, inverted hierarchies, and structural and grammatical experimentation, which are some of the same strategies that set Christian humor apart from other Christian dialogic modes within digital space (though the grotesque within is generally less gross) (Martin & Renegar 2007). Similarly, Bishop (1990) offers “Monte Python and the Holy Grail” (1975) as a carnivalesque presentation on nearly every level; for example how it spoofs the Christian gospel story and the cultural history it has engendered, as well as the conventions of narrative filmmaking itself.

As conceived by Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is a mode that facilitates participation by people at every level of society, especially those who exist outside of traditional power bases. However, the “upending” potential of the carnivalesque can be used to create, at least temporarily and/or within a specialized and specific context, a system that lends power to a select few via a staged and non-participatory construct. Patton and Snyder-Yuly (2012) argue that this “imaged-carnavalesque” has been created by reality television contest shows, wherein a relatively unknown set of judges whose standards (of beauty, of dancing prowess, etc.) would ordinarily carry little weight in society are given remarkable power in the staged setting. By highlighting and valorizing their peculiar metrics of what is “good”, the judges are imbued with authority that millions are meant to respect and honor. The carnival moment for these viewers is passive; they can have no input within a scripted, taped, televised “moment” of cultural

subversion. Ultimately, the authority that is challenged is that of the audience to determine and maintain its own “ordinary” standards of beauty, behavior, talent; the hegemony of the industry-approved “experts” is reinforced.

I have not found this “imaged-carnavalesque” theory to be present (or even supported) by my study of Christian humor, except perhaps in the very narrow sense that comedians and video producers can be said to be offering something of a pre-packaged carnivalesque to their audiences. However: 1) Those comedians and video producers are *themselves* members of the community comprising the audience, and as such their production qualifies as “folk art” that comes up from the community rather than is sent down from a corporate “on high”. 2) Concerning both contest shows and YouTube videos, audience reaction is unlimited, fulsome, and passionate, and as a dialogic phenomenon those reactions are as much a part of the carnivalesque nature of the event as the original material. 3) I do not agree with the authors’ unsupported statement that “Imaged-carnavalesque refers to the idea that the carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense no longer exists *because* (emphasis mine) of the onset of electronic media” (Patton and Snyder-Yuly 2012). Rather, one of the ancillary contentions of this dissertation is that the carnivalesque *continues* to exist as a function *of* electronic media.

Carnival theory can also be applied to performance art as an analytical device that sheds light on the nature of both the work itself and audiences’ relation to it. Filimon (2013) argues that *Peter Pan* is an example of the carnivalesque by way of form (e.g. inviting the participation of the audience by asking them to clap in order to save Tinker Bell’s life), by way of mimicry and inversion (since Peter apes both Captain Hook and Wendy at different points of the play, and since the role of Principal Boy is always

played by an actress), and by way of mockery and reification since the boys of Never-Never-Land unwittingly demonstrate the value of adult leadership even as they insist their society functions just fine without it.

Although not particularly applicable in this dissertation, I would be remiss were I to fail to note the extensive use that carnival theory has been put to by scholars of the classics. For the most part, they have concentrated on Greek authors and on the tendency of Greek comic genres to upset the structures of everyday life by mockery, inversion, and parody (see Barta et al 2001 for an excellent annotated bibliography). Most notably: Reckford (1987) has argued for the connection between comic obscenity and the religious context in which it arises, linking this idea to the carnival culture described by Bakhtin, and Edwards (1993) has shown that folk laughter, so liberatory in Bakhtin's medieval model, is not necessarily oppositional in Aristophanic comedy.

Contribution of This Dissertation

Using Hyers' and Bakhtin's theories as conceptual tools, this dissertation contributes towards understanding how American Christianity is changing as believers begin to take full advantage of the possibilities to express their religiosity online. It also addresses the under-theorized and under-documented nature of the digital sphere as a potentially carnivalesque space.

I will show that Christian ludic practice is challenges and re-contetualizes, even if only temporarily, historically maintained and enforced notions of how Christian faith is to be practiced, debated, addressed, and incorporated into the workaday secular lives of believers. I will show that much of this practice constitutes minor sacrilege to many (to some, even major sacrilege). At the same time I will show that this irreverence

problematizes, challenges, and expands Western ideas of the place of religion in secular life, the level of sanctified expression that is appropriate when addressing religious matters, and the authority of hierarchical institutions that seek to be the only arbiters of how religion is presented and preserved.

I hope to also show that the ludic treatment of religion disrupts, to some degree, how Christians qualify the nature of reverence, of sanctity, of piety, since by including the ludic in their observance they are expanding the reach of religion into their lives and therefore widening the scope of modes in which God can be revered. By way of the “upending” aspect of deployment of the ludic, the narrow and prescribed modes of observance that were previously considered to be the only ones appropriate have been (at least temporarily) relegated to the background as rote and inauthentic, and what was previously considered irreverent and perhaps even blasphemous has been elevated as lively experience that perhaps connects the lives of believers to their faith in a way that is more satisfying for being more genuine.

Why This Study is Unique

Herold (2012) has already argued, as I will, that the digital sphere of human experience is by nature a carnivalesque space. However, his study was restricted to Chinese users of the uniquely insular internet of that country, a factor that might complicate its applicability to the wider and more inclusive international web.

Additionally, that study does not address matters of religion or faith, and in fact addresses a very different conceptual condition: Herold is concerned that Chinese “netizens” are unaware of the connections between their online and offline “lives”, whereas the audiences and users addressed in this dissertation are fully (in many cases, exquisitely)

mindful not only of that relationship but also the relationship of both to the sphere of the Divine.

Only the paper on the nature of the “Hater Jesus” video touches on contemporary American Christianity as it is practiced by the laity; to my knowledge, no other study has applied carnival theory to modern as-practiced religion in the United States, and none have explicated just how religionists are using humor aimed at their own tradition. Quite a few classicists have applied literary carnival theory to the literature of ancient Greece, and found justification for Bakhtin’s claims that hierarchical religion inspires ludic treatment and that this mockery can be resistive without being oppositional, but those are studies concerning the novelization of a long-dead culture.

In fact, most of the contemporary work using carnival theory to explain the workings of human behavior has concerned political campaigns, as well as modes of expression/music/dress that are imagined as statements of resistance to popular and commodified cultural norms. However, the conclusions these studies have drawn are consistent with my contentions about ludic address of Christianity: it is about resistance to hierarchy but not its overthrow, alternative expressions without abandoning of what is normative, mockery and satire but not contempt. It is about stepping outside of the linguistic and cultural limits in place concerning the practices attached to an ideology in order to expand its reach rather than to weaken it. It is also about social transformation through the power of laughter, about inversion, about experimentation, about the relationship of institutional structures to the realism confronted by the everyday lives of ordinary people.

Chapter Three: Contexts of Dialog, Convergence, Religion, Comedy

In this chapter I provide the contexts of this study as it intersects with issues of discussion, digital practices, American religion online (and off), and how religious concerns can intersect with comedy. Each of these distinct but overlapping areas of scholarship both contribute to understanding the phenomena of Christian humor in digital space and can themselves potentially be enlarged by what this study has to offer. In this chapter I will argue that Christian humor has the potential to increase dialog between religious leaders and lay believers, is an example of convergence culture both in form and function, contributes towards forming a new (digital) landscape in which to explore spiritual practice and belief, and is an example of how media constitutes the practice of Christianity. Further, I will show how the ludic helps explain the careful balance between the sacred and the profane that must be considered when marketing religion, provide believers with a constructive mode that bridges the sacred and the profane, and creates space in which humor at the expense of the religion can be considered a productive exercise that brings the secular *into* the religious milieu in order to reify the faith.

The Carnival as Dialog

In concert with the carnivalesque, Bakhtin's conception of the dialogic is a helpful perspective from which to address the contingencies involved in presenting Christian humor online, since the interplay among producers and audiences (who frequently switch roles) constitutes a set of dialogic relations. In contrast to the monologic, putatively authoritative utterance, which closes off the possibility of further discourse, dialogic activity in the way of ludic consideration of Christianity is "a questioning, provoking, answering, objecting activity" (Bakhtin 1981) that allows for an

interrelated process. This process of ludic consideration has the potential to increase believers' constructive immersion in their faith by way of an extra-ecclesiastical dialogue played out using familiar and joyful language.

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which has gotten a lot more attention from scholars than his carnival theory, is complementary to the latter in the sense that laughter and the ludic help create spaces where dialogic exchange has the potential to displace monologic forms. Contestation, transgression, and the subversive treatment of both formulaic language and ceremony are attempts to insert one's own perspective into systems that have been set up to be one-way dicta from hierarchical officers rather than conversations.

In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), Bakhtin explicated his theory of "dialogism". In his view, a dialogic text carries on an ongoing conversation with other texts and other authors, while a monologic one makes pronouncement without reference (or interest in) discursive interaction. The dialogic text does not merely answer, correct, or extend a prior work, but is informed by that work (or works) and crucially informs the previous work in turn; the dialog extends in both directions. As such, no text that engages with another is entirely static or finalized. Nor, indeed, is the word or character of any individual (living or dead, mortal or divine) finalizable in any sense, because subsequent utterances to or about that person may change what we take to be his or her position.

Bakhtin held all language to ultimately be dialogic. This means that what anybody says exists in response to things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said in response (1981). As a result, all language (and the ideas which

language contains and communicates) is dynamic, relational, and engaged in a process of endless redescription.

According to Bakhtin, carnival is the context in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish, and interact (1984a). The ludic creates the situations in which conventions are broken or reversed and genuine dialog becomes possible, as among Christians with different views on how to approach issues of the faith and its social practices. Each individual voice defines an individual person's perspective, but mediated within the digital realm each can exert some small critical influence upon others contributing to Christian ludic dialog.

Though it can be productive, dialogic discourse is not always amiable; in the case of religious humor in digital space, as in the example of Everclear's "Hater Jesus" video, it may seem just the opposite. Consistent with the carnivalesque, much of the comedic commentary is rude, disrespectful, and (from the perspective of some of the faithful, to varying degrees) can be perceived as blasphemous. As Bernstein observes:

Instead of the generous mutual attentiveness that a dialog is supposed to foster, what we find just as often are speakers stalking one another with the edgy wariness of fighters ready to erupt into lethal violence the moment one of them senses an opening. The very dialogism Bakhtin celebrates already contains a darker and more desperate strand than his account usually acknowledges. (1989)

Convergence Culture

This dissertation is a study of how the ludic is used to address Christianity within digital space, and how Christianity is altered by that practice. Most of the theory and context of the study concerns a literary theory and focuses on religion, its historical

practice and how ludic treatment of it has historically been received. Theories concerning digital practices generally, and how the culture is affected by them, are also relevant to this study, however, and perhaps the most applicable is “convergence culture”. In convergence culture, one broad topic is addressed, constructed, and referenced via multiple texts and potentially along a loosely converging line of distinct narratives, and popular culture products are “borrowed” and modified to communicate a new meaning. Christianity has always been an example of convergence culture, and the ludic treatment of religious motifs that is the subject of this dissertation is an extension of that tradition.

Much of the Christian humor presented in digital space is constructed using the mechanisms of convergence culture. I argue that this is so in two ways: for the first, redeploying the motifs of Christian practice and culture (worship music, prayer, sermons, Bible stories and characters, etc.) within a ludic frame expands the opportunities to approach and consider what Christianity is about and provides a richer experience for those who choose to participate. For the second part, many specific examples of Christian humor modify and repurpose elements of popular culture (particularly music) as a means of increasing the appeal and accessibility of Christian themes to a wider audience. Furthermore, both the expansion of religion into the digital sphere and through the ludic mode continue Christianity’s long tradition of embracing new forms of media in order to further its message and ministry.

“Convergence culture” is the term Henry Jenkins (2006) uses to describe the ways that the collection of phenomena we curate under the term “convergent media” has changed the relationship between content producers and consumers. Among those phenomena, the most relevant to this study is convergent media’s facilitation of

participatory culture. Contemporary media users are not passive consumers of content or mere recipients of messages generated by media industries, but instead are creative agents who help define how media content is used and, in some cases, help shape the content itself. This participatory culture has of course extended into the practice of religion, and to some degree helps inform both the how and the why of the increased production of carnivalesque religious humor in digital space.

Media convergence has expanded the possibility of participation because it allows greater access to the production and circulation of culture. The technological side of this transformation is easy to appreciate: the low cost and ease of access, ease of content appropriation, and low cost of distribution afforded by digital technology make audience/amateur participation available to more people than ever before, by several orders of magnitude. While the technological aspect of convergence is vital, it is only the accompanying cultural convergence – wherein the audience has become the user, and has the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate content – that makes the technology relevant within human society. As Lisa Gitelman put so well:

First, a medium is a technology that enables communication; ...second, a medium is a set of 'protocols' or social and cultural practices that have grown up around technology. Delivery systems are simply and only technologies; media are also cultural systems. (2008)

Social media are the driver of much of convergent media, with its tremendous power of networking people together. Not only can social media users directly share their production with each other, they can use the network to point their networked familiars to the production of others, production that is instantly available and is itself grist for the

participation mill. Social media have three core characteristics, all of which contribute to the ease of distribution and subsequent popularization of Christian comedy within digital space:

- 1) Everyone in the network is now simultaneously a potential producer, distributor, and consumer.
- 2) The power of social media comes from the connections among users.
- 3) Social media allows coordination between users at speeds and scales previously unimagined. (Howard Rheingold 2008)

Another aspect of convergent media is “transmedia storytelling”, which is the practice of telling different parts of a story, or different versions of a story using the same characters, across a variety of media channels in such a way that they complement each other or even come together to form a more coherent and complete narrative whole. “Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins 2007). According to the logic of transmedia storytelling, user-generated content constitutes (most frequently) an unauthorized extension of the original text that enhances some fans’ engagement with the characters/world/premises of the original and in fact may expand understanding of the original. For some owners⁸ of the original material these extensions can be interpreted as a threat to the integrity or coherence of that original, but for users they become one version among many that deepens their involvement with the characters and their stories. As Spanish media scholar Carlos Scolari has observed, transmedia storytelling “...is a particular narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema,

⁸ Some are literally owners of a copyrighted property; others, such as the clerics that lead a religious organization, may feel that their obligation to protect the integrity of the original motifs the church is founded upon is akin to an ownership stake.

comics, television, video games, etc.) (2009).” While transmedia storytelling can be a source of brand extension for media corporations, it more often functions as a form of amateur engagement as users put together a richer and more complex narrative for their own amusement.

Spreadability is another aspect of convergent media, referring to the capacity of the public to actively engage in the circulation of media content through social networks; in the process some may expand the network’s economic value and cultural worth. A countervailing principle that might better inform one of the functions of Christian humor is “drillability”, a clever metaphor developed by Jason Mittell (2012) for describing viewer engagement with narrative complexity. A drillable example of media content can be enjoyed or appreciated on its own, but can also serve as an enticement for further exploration. These invite a sort of “forensic fandom” that encourages viewers to probe beneath the surface to get at more of a story and take in more of its history and details. Drillable content, which really can be any content about which there is more to discover by way of an internet search, “...create[s] magnets for engagement, drawing viewers into the storyworlds and urging them to drill down to discover more...” (Mittell 2012). The spreadable and drillable qualities of digital media are complementary vectors of cultural engagement: spreadability causes content to accumulate more viewers though many will only engage with it for the short term, and drillability makes it possible for some portion of those people to devote more of their time and energies to engaging with the content in a way that provides a deeper and more comprehensive experience.

Convergence culture signifies a cultural shift wherein consumers are encouraged to seek new information and make connections among dispersed media content. The

phenomenon of producing Christian humor in digital space is an example of this shift and exemplifies it in many respects. Religious ideas and motifs are used by individuals to create something new (text-based jokes, videos, etc.), something beyond the control of the corporate organizations of institutional Christianity that have historically defined their proper use. Even as adapted by specific congregations, this is still an organic, bottom-up process that facilitates expressions beyond the original texts.

Multi-media presentations of a story or event (as in *The Matrix*, which integrated the three live-action movies with video games and animated short films, or with *American Idol*, which combined performance, contest, phone texting, and product placement) have long been preceded by presentations of religion; in a very real sense, religious traditions have always been multi-media. If they did not invent the form, certainly they developed it. Christianity is a fine example. The Bible is the foundational text, providing a collection of stories sourced from different authors across a wide temporal range. Ancillary stories have become vitally important to the faith (such as the lives of saints, the story of Veronica, miracles [Hadith tradition within Islam is another example of ancillary text becoming integral to a tradition, as the Talmudic is within Judaism]). Different eras have seen culturally influenced and ever-evolving image presentation via icons, windows, sanctuary décor, art, and clerical vestments. Architectural presentation captures the projection of Christian ideology (think soaring cathedrals, missions, and conspicuous local churches) for over 1500 years (McNamara 2009). Music has played an essential role in both worship and propagation (Wilson-Dickson 2003), and the performance of ritual is itself a mediated presentation of religious fundamentals. All of it comes together in a multi-media, participatory, collaborative

effort that produces the wholeness of the faith tradition. Because Christianity is increasingly democratic (Eck 2001), and increasingly uses digital technology (Campbell 2012; Hutchings 2013; Cheong, Fisscher-Nielsen & Gelfgren 2012; Lundby 2012; Helland 2007; Hojsgaard 2005; Young 2004), the variety and content of mediated content that can be integrated into Christian practice have increased enormously.

Christian communities are part of this convergence culture. The production of Christian humor within those communities is an example of how practitioners have taken the characters and texts of Biblical and traditional liturgy and done something with them that speaks to individual believers' own specific positioning with the larger Christian tradition. By updating presentation of the stories and attendant morals of Christianity, they are contemporizing the faith for themselves and for others, as well as insinuating the motifs of the faith into the latest medium (Campbell 2012; Hutchings 2013; Cheong, Fisscher-Nielsen & Gelfgren 2012; Lundby 2012; Helland 2007; Hojsgaard 2005; Young 2004).

Digital Religion

The rise of the internet has dramatically expanded the terrain of religious expression, communication, and cultural consumption, in large part because its low entry costs and broad reach created significant openings for smaller or more dispersed religious communities. As with popular culture in the past, the impact of the Web's particularities – its new rhetorics, visual cultures fraught with interactivities, and distinctive forms of nonlinearity – are all but impossible to anticipate. (Griffith & McAllister 2008)

It is my intention that this study of Christian humor online contributes to scholarship in the emerging field of digital religion. To date, I have discovered no work that specifically addresses the function of the ludic as Christians explore the possibilities for taking spiritual, congregational, and missionary activities online. Towards contextualizing my work within the digital religion field extant, here I review the history of the discipline in order to make clear the themes, concerns, and theoretical approaches that have thus far been taken in the study of religion as it confronts, and interacts within, the digital sphere.

This dissertation supports my view that the ludic mode contributes to the phenomenon afforded by digital religion of offering a new social landscape in which to explore spiritual practice. American Christianity's insinuation into the digital sphere constitutes a change in how faith is observed in this country, and the ludic is an example of an alternative approach to faith that helps participants integrate the spiritual and corporeal aspects of their lives.

That the impact of the digital on the practice and promulgation of religion has been, and continues to be, nearly "impossible to predict" is partially reflected in the fact that scholars' conceptualization of just how to characterize its study has evolved in three distinct (though chronologically overlapping) waves. The first wave developed in the mid 1990's and is regularly referred to under the heading "cyber-religion" (Campbell 2012). Cyber-religion described the importation of religion into the space created by virtual technology, the nascent moves that lay believers were making as they tried to include their faith practices in their online interactions and the even more ginger forays into the digital being made by clerics and their institutions. Much of the work centered on utopian

(and dystopian) ideas about how and whether religious practice would be freed from traditional constraints, such as requirements that ceremonies be conducted in sanctified physical spaces or involve the touch of an ordained priest, or diluted out of existence as believers moved towards crafting a tailored, personal spiritual experience rather than lend their presence to traditional assemblies as congregants (Bauwens 1996).

Two debates dominated those early discussions. One focused on whether studies of cyber-religion (and also use of the term) should be restricted to the activities of religious groups that *only* conduct their affairs in the virtual world (Dawson 2000), or broadened to embrace any presence of religious organizations and religious activities in cyberspace or whatever fell under "...the gradual emergence of new, electronically inspired religious practice and ideas" (Brasher 2001). In short: shall we include in our discussions of cyber-religion the activities of those groups that include the digital in their practice but have not abandoned non-digital structures? The second debate was very much related to the first and concerned the degree to which both the new "digital only" movements, and the extension of traditional religion practice into digital space, were "authentic" expressions of religiosity that had the potential to survive past their initial novelty.

When in 2000 Christopher Helland offered the categories of "religion online" and "online religion" as a way to differentiate, respectively, whether rituals and information were based online or off, he neatly provided cover for both camps under the same tent. Though online religion was (and is) less common, the phenomenon demonstrates how the virtual offers a new social landscape for imagining the spiritual and a space within which to explore spiritual practice. Subsequent work helped to frame the field by identifying the

particularities of online-based religiosity (Kawabata & Tamura 2007), how traditional religion could be moved online (Howard 2010), and how these two worlds frequently overlap (Young 2004). However, I agree with Helland's (2007) more recent arguments that these two distinctions are now becoming too blurry to be useful. Specifically, as religious practice becomes more integrated with the digital, physical church congregations make use of digital space as part of their outreach beyond the Sunday service, and online groups increasingly seek to virtually emulate the activities and motifs of traditional practice.

The term "digital religion", currently in vogue, names the third wave in the study of religion in digital space and has been used as the title of a number of conferences (including the 2012 Conference on Digital Religion at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where I presented my preliminary findings on the topic of religious humor in digital space). I agree that the term aptly "...describes the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated" (Campbell 2012).

At least concerning Christianity in the United States, I agree with Chris Helland that the incorporation of the digital into religious practice constitutes a slowly developing, fundamental change in how the faith is observed (2007). Digital religion features "...a phenomenon that addresses the same type of ontological and metaphysical questions that religious institutions and traditions have usually done" but "...whose contents reflect the main features of postmodern cyberculture...[including] a solid opposition to traditionally structured religious institutions" (Hojsgaard 2005). Even if digital religion represents a distinct cultural sphere of religious practices with unique

elements that can only be accommodated in virtual space, it would be a mistake to claim that it is dichotomous with other forms of religion (Grieve 2012). Digital religious practice draws directly from the traditions of pre-digital, corporeal religion (the nature of the deity, the nature of humanity's relationship to the deity, the nature of worship, and so forth), and as yet does not exist without importation from, and coordination with, non-digital religious practice.

Religion is indeed changing to accommodate and take advantage of the potential of digital media, just as it has adjusted to and assimilated previously introduced "new media" platforms in order to both keep up with the culture and effectively reach its intended audience. How religion contributes to expression of identity, community, and authority is now partially being shaped by the enhanced ability of both lay and clerical believers to project themselves in and through digital space. The two most recent surveys of the field include work by nearly all of its notable scholars, and indicate that the most contested and oft-considered themes within digital religion continue to be ritual, identity, community, authority, authenticity, and religion itself (including theology) (Cheong et al 2012, Campbell 2012)⁹.

Certainly online religious practice is attractive to some because it allows them to participate in their faith free of the perceived constraints of corporeal participation. As Staarup argues, in many cases the motivation for those who choose to experience religion through online avatars is the desire for an encounter with the sacred to help solve life problems with fully preserved, perhaps even enhanced, human dignity (2012). Since their spirits are no longer compromised by the frailties of their bodies, in some sense they are

⁹ A quick comparison of the two volumes shows that the field includes a tight core of scholars: five of the authors are in common between these edited volumes, and Stewart Hoover wrote both the foreword to Cheong et al (2012) and the afterword to Campbell (2012).

able to transcend their fleshly concerns, even what they physically look like, and explore spiritual concerns with others without being judged in a way that comes back to their “real” lives. In virtual space congregants only risk what they *choose* what to present of themselves rather than being forced to enter the church with their bodies and all the history that is attached to their corporeal identity.

Some believers are using digital technology in order to develop faith practices that are personally authentic *to them* and *for them*, practices that presuppose the notion that spiritual mediation that eliminates (to any degree) the corporeal brings their spirits that much closer to contact with the divine. Scholars have found that these virtual explorations of faith may be effective and satisfying, or at least partially so, for those seeking an alternative (and/or a compliment) to traditional participation. For example, Heinz Scheifinger has examined the growing interrelationship between Hindu worship online and offline and concludes that since a *puja* is a symbolic ritual to begin with the experience of one online is not fundamentally different than the traditional offline version (2012). A report on Buddhist rituals conducted in the Second Life¹⁰ “world” found that the simulations of certain elements (e.g. incense, meditation cushions) are adequate for many and serve well for those seeking to learn more about Buddhism; however, for others they are an incomplete facsimile that must be confirmed by way of traditional practice in order to be satisfying (Connelly 2012). After analyzing the video game *Abu Isa’s Quest for Knowledge*, in which players are in the role of an Islamic student tasked with fighting wizards and recovering ancient manuscripts of Islamic knowledge, Vit

¹⁰ Second Life is an online virtual world, active since summer 2003, that allows users to interact with each other through avatars (www.secondlife.com).

Sisler finds that Muslim “edutainment” games have the potential to be “the cutting-edge conveyors of contemporary Islam” (2012).

Religious practice that includes a variety of digital applications, in addition to all the other modes of religious observance and investigation participated in via the corporeal, can create a fluidity that allows for a variety of perspectives on an individual’s faith and practice that are yet to be integrated into a coherent and personal religious outlook (Wagner 2012). For many who participate in digital religion as part of their religiosity, authenticity of belief or quest comes not in a monotonic outlook but in an awareness of the flow of multiple notions within a single person. This idea may help to explain a faithful individual’s ability to maintain space for (sometimes critical) religious humor without serious challenge to basic principles or fear of engaging in blasphemy.

Groups and individuals operating independently of established churches or denominations drive much of the Christian use of digital space. However, many traditional churchgoers are likely to be led to incorporating the digital into their practice through the efforts of their local church leaders. How (or whether) those leaders choose to incorporate the digital into their parish activities potentially sets the tone for much lay activity and may be predictive of how their digital practices develop.

Church leaders have three ways to engage with the digital. First, the use of a monological, one-way information sharing model serves as a strong voice for the teachings and traditions of the faith, but tends to uphold stereotypes of a distant and elitist church and offers parishioners nothing they can’t get from going to service and reading the church bulletin. Second, a dialogical model that involves the participation of online users, whether parishioners or seekers, satisfies the expectations of those users but risks

blurring and individualizing the Christian message in a way that might ultimately reduce its “specialness” relative to secular concerns and disrupt the shared ideology that gives a community of faith its coherence. Third, conducting church online (“cyberchurch”) expands the sacred space of the church and might engage more people in religious practice, but almost inevitably will lead to a reduction in the importance of the physical parish and the corporeal community (Fisher-Nielsen 2012). This last point, considered in light of Lynch’s (2007) observation that increased secularization ultimately weakens a religious movement¹¹, challenges whether a church’s missionary outreach in the way of humor is ultimately in its best interest.

Religion as Media

I argue that at its core Christianity is *constituted* by multiple forms of media, and therefore understanding all the ways (including the ludic) that Christians use media to practice, explore, and negotiate their faith is vital towards understanding its practice in the United States. The presentation of Christianity from church to parishioner, from congregant to congregant, from establishment to uninitiated seeker is almost entirely controlled by variations on mediated forms. Consider that even the least overtly sacramental denominations depend on visual, oral, aural, and material culture in everyday life in order to contextualize their messages and make them comprehensible to their members; “high church” traditions (e.g. Catholic and Anglican) that rely heavily on ritual and practice can scarcely be identified without such elements. The Christian tradition and

¹¹ Lynch (2007) found that increased secularization initially increases the popularity and attendance for a church, but only temporarily. Ultimately, the church is weakened (and will often wither away entirely) because the difference between the church’s culture and the secular is so slight that it is no longer “special”; whatever spirituality has survived the secularization/popularization program is robbed of its vigor and the church is found no longer to be worth attending.

its establishments are almost unimaginable without art, without its distinctive architecture, without the faces and scenes and symbols, human and divine, emblazoned on everything from windows to vestments to bumper stickers, that define religious communities historically and in the current moment (see Davis, in Clark 2007).

Members of religious communities also use media to increase their sense of social and political cohesion. Religious audiences (which often come to include political factions) actively use media for news and entertainment and to communicate with others who hold similar values and beliefs. In so doing they reinforce their own worldviews, which they often feel are at odds with society in general and certain media in particular, and create new social interactions both within and without their own houses of worship (see Stout 2001). This is especially relevant as I study the social media group that provides Christian humor on Facebook. Consistent with Stout's formulation, I find that part of the function of presenting this content is forming/maintaining a community and contributing to a "sense of social cohesion" among Christians within the larger Facebook emporium of friendships and allegiances. However, this dissertation is less concerned with motivations for creating sites than with how site producers and consumers engage Christianity via the ludic.

Whether progressive or conservative, both organized religious communities and individual believers have ideologies they want to share with others. Among Christian groups the motivations include a soteriological (missionary) mandate, but even non-missionary religions have an interest in making clear what they are about. For their messages to be effective they have to reach a large number of people, be accessible, and

be comprehensible. In short the message has to be mediated, attractively and convincingly.

Mediating religion is a natural and fluid undertaking, as media and religion by their natures are very similar enterprises. Media and religion occupy the same cultural imperative, which is to say that both are invested in communicating meaningful narratives and “truths” to their audiences using the available cultural capital of symbols, sounds, and historical touchstones, as well as subtle evocations of both rational and emotional response in the audience (Hoover & Lundby 1997). People use media to construct personal identity and social solidarity, to learn about their social environment, to judge their behavior against others, to attempt to suss out guideposts for a well-lead life: these are also among the primary hallmarks of the religious quest. Since media and religion share a common phenomenological base (Hoover & Lundby 1997, Hoover 2006), it is arguable that they should no longer be thought of as separate spheres but as two sides of the same coin, one secular and one spiritual, as complementary enterprises using similar tools on their way to fulfilling vital sociological imperatives. “Media consumption is rooted in human ontological imagination and practice, and media may therefore play a quasi-religious role in everyday life” (Hoover & Lundby 1997). It is worth noting that, etymologically, the words religion and communication both refer to the work of binding together; it is in this sense that media and religion constitute the “figural archive for all techniques and technologies that render the world available to human volition” (deVries & Weber 2001).

This connection between religion and media is an important contributing factor influencing Christians to include digital space in their practice of religion. The digital

sphere is growing as a medium, increasingly becoming as vital a site of cultural expression and participation as any symbol-making enterprise preceding it (Morozov 2011; Wu 2010; Anderson 2009; Shirkey 2008; Solove 2008; Jenkins 2006; Benkler 2005; McChesney & Nichols 2011; Mayer-Schönberger 2011). To *not* be a part of it would be to *not* maintain the two-millennia old tradition of utilizing every available method of mediating the message and ideology of the faith; the “figural archive” that deVries & Weber describe would be incomplete, an unacceptable condition within a faith that has regularly embraced creativity to satisfy its proselytic mandate. As such, the digital space is attractive to Christian communities; they almost have to engage across it or abandon part of what constitutes their historical faith tradition.

The Religious Marketplace

This dissertation is in direct conversation with the issues implicit when we consider the marketing of religion. Marketing is at its core a collection of persuasion strategies deployed to create favor for a product that leads to an allegiance action (a purchase, a vote, one’s presence, etc.); just so, the use of self-critical humor is also a persuasion strategy meant to bolster allegiance (even if only the joker’s own allegiance). Many of the challenges that face those using Christian humor are the same as for anyone marketing their particular “church”, and can inform the decisions that go into ludic postings. The essential conundrum of religious marketing is the need to attract new members using popular cultural motifs versus the imperative to maintain enough separation from popular culture in order to preserve the religion’s distinctiveness. Producers of Christian comedic material have to maintain a careful balance in order to satisfy the first condition without sacrificing the second, or risk the exercise becoming

antithetical to their purpose. This dissertation contributes to understanding the specific considerations producers of this type of content confront as they attempt to negotiate the potential benefits and pitfalls of employing Christian ludic content within digital space, and thus contributes to enlarging our understanding of religious marketing more generally.

Although ours is an increasingly secularized and commercialized culture, Christianity (and religion generally) continues to thrive. In addition to genuine faith in the divine and/or the inclination to maintain what may be an important part of national, ethnic, and familial heritage, the reasons religions endure may concern fundamental features of this modern era. What has seemed to become a social and natural universe defined by increasingly certain knowledge is also a system in which personal security is still compromised by risk; in addition, there is doubt about the “degree to which modern scientific advances actually afford an increased quality of existence” (Giddens 1991). Contemporary forms of spirituality and religious expression represent a return to a hereditary and familiar response to otherwise repressed concerns, and address issues of the moral meaning of existence that modern institutions not only fail to resolve but also frequently attempt to dissolve altogether.

As individuals reach for religion, either for the first time or when returning to a faith practice previously abandoned, they are confronted with a myriad of options. The religious marketplace in which the quest is played out is defined by the institutions, texts, and practices we call “the media” (Hoover 2002). The study of this relationship among religion, media, and marketplace has been called the “new paradigm” within the

sociology-of-religion field (Clark 2007), and in my view is the central organizing concern of the study of digital religion.

By providing more options, globalization makes the tensions of the religious marketplace more acute. Seekers are exposed to a wider variety of traditions, ideologies, faith practices, and religio-cultural motifs than ever before, and so religious groups looking to increase their membership numbers are in stiffer competition with one another. In order to distinguish themselves clearly, religions tend to become more particularistic as they become more global. They are operating under the influence of, and almost required to react to, the whims of a common global culture that is increasingly organized around consumption, spectacle, and the efficiencies of promotion (see Beyer, in Clark 2007). In this highly contested atmosphere, popular culture affects how religion is expressed and proselytized.

As religions have had to compete both with each other and with secular culture they have effectively had to become brands, marketing their product like any other that consumers can peruse and then choose based on whatever criteria seems good to them. However, when marketing is introduced into a category it is liable to change both the category and the products that compete within it (see Einstein 2007). When spirituality and religion are marketed people are introduced to the idea that they can shop for them, and so they frequently do. As people shop around more and are increasingly willing to move on to another “brand” if they feel it is more likely to satisfy than the one they are currently with, religions have to increase their level of promotion in order to be noticed among so many competing forces. From that it follows that those same religions are increasingly prone to create a product that people will “buy”, therefore changing the

product to suit the market. However, while a church's communication style must adapt to the times a flexible outreach style should not be extended so far that the message becomes ambiguous; in short, a "church's brand promise must be non-negotiable" (Musa & Ahmadu 2012).

This marketplace paradigm helps explain why faith organizations that have traditionally been wary of the ludic now include a humor section in their online ministry site, or even a separate site dedicated to jibes made at their own expense. They may have no choice. Offline religion in the United States is all but required to have a full online presence since church members increasingly integrate the digital into their daily lives; further, church leaders are under pressure to embrace this change and let their young people lead the way into the kind of church experience they find stimulating or else embrace the possibility of gradual extinction via attrition (Lundby 2012). Many evangelical Christian groups find themselves having to compete with popular media and television shows that use evangelical imagery and Bible stories to their own purpose, and so feel it imperative that they offer a perspective in distinct counterpoint (Clark 2007). Modern media has caused a sort of "flattening" of religious cultural symbols, using them as common artifacts and so to some extent robbing them of their traditional significance and power (Stout 2001).

Whether such tactics are effective in growing and/or preserving any particular religious denomination is not altogether clear. In an extensive historical review, Finke and Stark (2005) show that marketing drives the growth of denominations; as people are convinced that particular churches fill their needs, the denominations grow; if prospective audiences are not so convinced, the denominations fail to attract enough new members to

outpace natural attrition and shrink. However, the authors also note that religious movements will continue to grow only to the extent that they maintain sufficient tension with the secular influences around them, and remain sufficiently strict so that members feel they are unique relative to the general population. In a kind of regenerative cycle, secularization leads to the withering of large churches but also to revivals of religiosity and the birth of new groups, with no net loss of religiousness. As a general rule, churches that work hardest to conform to changing modern sensibilities are those that decline the most rapidly; “theological refinement is the kind of progress that results in organizational bankruptcy” (Finke & Stark 2005).

Progressive Spirituality

A progressive and liberalizing turn in some precincts of the Christian church in the United States has had an influence on the increased (and increasingly acceptable) production and consumption of Christian humor as a mode of spiritual exercise and missionary outreach. It has created space in which humor at the expense of the religion can be considered a productive exercise that brings the secular *into* the religious space in order to use it for reifying the faith, whereas prior to the progressive movement it was more often considered a blasphemous pathogen that could only infect and sully the spiritual enterprise. This conceptual space comes at the same time as the digital revolution and has found a place of expression within it, facilitated by the technical and cultural affordances of that medium that, I contend, include the carnivalesque.

Religious Studies scholarship has long held that religious thought in general rests on a sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane. Mircea Eliade argued that whether the divine nexus of a given religion takes the form of God, Gods, or

mythologized Ancestors, ultimately the sacred contains all "reality", or value, and everything else acquires "reality" only to the extent that it participates in the sacred (1959). The "profane" space of nonreligious experience can only be organized arbitrarily: it has no qualitative differentiation relative to the sacred "real", and hence no orientation in its inherent structure. Extending this notion into a consideration of morality, profane space gives mankind no pattern for appropriate behavior because there is no qualification within profane space to indicate whether an action is "good" or "bad", since without the sacred those concepts have no meaning. By contrast, a site that manifests the sacred has an inherent sacred structure to which religious man can choose to conform himself. Understanding this principle, religious organizations have traditionally insisted on separating themselves from the precincts of the profane in order to differentiate themselves as a precinct of the sacred that has little in common with the realm of the profane (Eliade 1959).

The alternative is a less restrictive approach developed in the last four decades. Those who have developed and participate in it are a "progressive milieu", a diffuse and informally affiliated (if affiliated at all) collection of individuals, organizations, and networks across and beyond a range of religious traditions that are joined by a liberal approach to belief and a left-of-center set of political attitudes and commitments (Lynch 2007). The roots of this "progressive spirituality" have emerged out of four concerns: a desire for an approach to religion and spirituality that is tailored to a modern liberal society; a rejection of patriarchy and search for religious forms that are authentic for women; a move to integrate the results of scientific inquiry into the realm of the sacred; and an effort to include ecological concern for the welfare of the planet. The progressive

trend is less concerned with maintaining a sharp separation between the sacred and the profane and in fact rejects that there is (or should be) any genuine differentiation between them at all. Progressives play out their engagement with religious and secular life as a two-way exchange that means to elevate the mundane via influence from the spiritual. On the one hand, spiritual principles are brought to bear on secular issues (such as joining the ecological movement from the perspective that it is our obligation to preserve the home that the Divine has graced us with), and on the other hand being unafraid to let secular motifs inflect spiritual observance as well as the projection (mediation) of religious ideas and ideologies.

Summary

The scholarship featured in this review undergirds my research by providing a framework for approaching the tensions involved in negotiating the use of humor by Christian communities within digital media. Taken together, these literatures in the areas of contemporary & historic religion, media theory, media history, literary theory, and comedy demonstrate that the issue of Christian humor as a mode of observance and religious/cultural reification is complex. The study of this phenomena is well preceded by the separate study of its component elements, and as a significant portion of the way religious observance is changing in this country is worthy of both documentation and theoretical analysis.

Chapter 4: Varying Perceptions of Religious Humor

This chapter provides an overview of changing attitudes concerning Christian humor over time. Christian humor was popular for centuries, fell out of favor in the

Puritan-influenced United States, but since the 1950's has been freshly resurgent. I argue that this popularity is significant in light of how recently, and how vehemently, it was opposed as a matter of government regulatory policy. I also argue that the recent acceleration of this popularity is due to the access and dissemination ease afforded by the digital.

In medieval Europe Christian humor was embraced during the Lenten Carnival period and also in the year-round tradition of the "holy fool", a character whose mocking treatment of the sacred and debasement of his person was meant to be an example of humility and reflect Christ's embrace of sinners. During most of the 20th century in the United States, broadcast media were forbidden both by law and convention from insulting or making fun of religion, and only recently has television fully engaged in such programming with shows like *South Park*. Concerning live performance, in 1964 comedian Lenny Bruce was the last American convicted of obscenity, a charge motivated not by his vulgar language but rather by his repeated insults for the Catholic church.

The Holy Fool

I will show in the next section (see *A History of Censorship*) that humorous treatments of Christian motifs and practices have not been welcome in recent centuries by either ecclesiastical authorities or the community of faith. Historically, however, this was not always so: there is a rich tradition of including the ludic in practices of faith within Christianity, and the ethos behind it largely parallels the reasoning behind the contemporary practices that are the subject of this dissertation.

The producers and consumers of Christian humor in digital space are allying themselves with a cultural moment in which people understand that "the line that divides

orthodoxy from heresy is more ambiguous than commonly assumed” (Beaudoin 1997). Ergo, they are comfortable working within a register in which the idea that the “burlesque of the sacred is often itself a form of the sacred” (Willeford 1969) makes sense and feels appropriate within the contemporary moment. The particular line of argument adopted by the producers of Christian humor may be a critique of what they perceive as overly simplistic, overly ecclesiastical, or (as in the case of “Hater Jesus” [see page 173]) militaristic forms of religiosity, or it may just be a way of presenting the traditions of their faith in a way that feels accessible and fresh. The device of presenting Jesus, other Biblical characters, and church figures past and present as “holy fools” gives viewers who appreciate irony a way to look beyond the ludic material’s nominal meaning (e.g. mockery of the motifs of Christianity, satire of Christians themselves) to find a deeper, potentially spiritual message.

The presentation of Christianity by way of the ludic is a strategic choice that taps into a long Christian tradition of the holy fool that began with Jesus and the Apostle Paul. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul wrote: “If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a fool so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight” (1 Cor. 3:18–19). This Pauline ‘fool in Christ’ or ‘fool for Christ’s sake’ tradition was later developed into a spiritual discipline and became an important feature of monasticism (Phan 2001). As Saward argues, “all monks are called” into this sort of folly “because it strikes at the black heart of the world’s sin—egoism and pride” (1980). The tradition of the holy fool was particularly strong in Eastern Orthodoxy and especially in Russia, where “fools for Christ’s sake” (yurodivyi) walked naked through the streets, slept with dogs, and

associated with prostitutes and other sinners, thereby scandalizing the “righteous” with their “compassion for the morally reprobate” (Saward 1980).

Holy fools in the Christian tradition challenge shallow and egocentric forms of spirituality by reminding the faithful of Christ’s divine humility and the mystery of the Incarnation (in which the Divine chose to be born as a mortal man to the family of a poor carpenter). “This mystery,” according to Berger, “is the self-humiliation of God, the *kenosis*, who descends from the infinite majesty of the divinity, not only to take on the form of a human being but one despised, mocked, and finally killed under the most degrading circumstances” (1997). Those degrading circumstances followed a long Roman tradition that preceded Jesus’ crucifixion, wherein fools and madmen regularly played the role of kings at the Bacchanalia, the predecessor of the medieval feast of fools from which Bakhtin later derived his theory of the carnivalesque (Willeford, 1969). Jesus suffered Pilate and the Roman soldiers who crucified him to regard him as a fool. When he failed to deny he was “King of the Jews” he was ridiculed in a manner that was consistent with the treatment of “fool kings” at the Bacchanalia: the Roman soldiers took him and subjected him to a mock coronation.

In the Praetorium, “before the whole battalion,” the soldiers stripped him, put a scarlet robe on him, placed a crown of thorns on his head and a reed in his hand, and “mocked him” (Matt. 27:29; Mark 15:20). On the cross he is derided by the people (Matt. 27:39; Mark 15:20); scoffed at (Luke 23:35) and mocked (Mark 15:31) (Saward, 1980)

“From that time on,” according to Berger (1997), “every fool for Christ’s sake both participates in and symbolizes the *kenosis* of God that brings about the redemption of the

world”.

Through a variety of grotesque acts holy fools point their audiences toward the “numinous— the indefinable infinitude of God” (Otto 1950, quoted by Huxley 1990) as the most extreme counterpoint to their base and carnal behavior. The revelatory power of the ludic is partially explained by the sacred/profane dichotomy (see page 34) theorized by Eliade wherein only the sacred defines the “real”, and that which is clearly not sacred threatens the order of the universe. As Berger writes: “Holy folly, in its grotesqueness, makes explicit the otherness breaking into ordinary reality, but also the impossibility of containing this otherness in the categories of ordinary reality” (1997).

The holy fool also calls forth the numinous, ironically by suspending the power of the divine by invoking a call to humility. As Stewart (1999) argues: “There are no names, no images, and no attributes which could ever convey more than a fleeting insight into the nature of God. God cannot be defined, categorized, limited, understood, described, assigned gender, or named”. In other words, God (in order to *be* God) is by definition much bigger and much more complex than we can imagine. Christian humor mocks the simple-mindedness of those who have transformed God from Otto’s figure of “numinous awe” that extends “beyond our apprehension and comprehension” (1950) into a mundane potentate who “lacks any sense of the numinous... [and] fails to extend beyond the finite boundaries of the ego” (Stewart, 1999).

Consistent with the stated intentions/justifications of those who practice Christian humor online, in literature and popular media holy fools often serve a pedagogical purpose (Shouse & Fraley 2010) that is consistent with the historical holy fool who “...teaches people by means of images of sin and he tells them truth disguised behind a

fool's appearance and behavior" (Heller & Volkova 2003). However, caution must be taken when using this strategy, especially among those who are not familiar with it or its history. As Elizabeth-Anne Stewart writes in *Jesus the Holy Fool*, to associate Jesus with foolishness is to run "the risk of causing misunderstanding and deep offense" though "The risks involved are warranted [because] to understand the Holy Foolishness of Christ can lead one into a deeper contemplation of the mystery of God" (1999). Those involved with the production and consumption of religious humor in digital space are confronted with this same pedagogical opportunity as well as the very same potential pitfalls associated with negotiating its limits.

This brief review of the holy fool tradition within Christianity demonstrates that the use of religious comedy as a spiritual exercise is by no means a new phenomenon. As a long-standing (though emphasized more in some eras than others) tradition, it is an established part of Christian practice. The digital has hardly inspired a whole new way to express faith. Rather, it facilitates the carnivalesque expression both technically and culturally, and comes at a time in the history of American Christianity when restrictive Puritan modes of observing the faith have started giving way to more progressive modes that recognize an imperative to engage with popular culture and secular means of exploring/testing ideology.

A History of Censorship

Part of the significance of contemporary religious humor as an element of spiritual practice, especially as it has flowered in digital space, is its novelty. Regardless of the Holy Fool tradition of antiquity, the vitriolic reactions some have to contemporary Christian humor suggest that it is both unexpected and unwelcome by many. Such

expression was systematically censored in the last century and continues to a lesser degree, a fact that both reflects people's discomfort with the form and has itself had the effect of making it seem both unacceptable and beneath the good taste of a respectable society. How systematic and rigorous that censorship was, and the difficulty of challenging it that is demonstrated by the persecution of comedian Lenny Bruce, contextualizes the significant change that contemporary Christian humor in digital space represents.

The history of modern media¹² in the 20th and 21st centuries is replete with examples of censorship and attempts at social control of content. Based on normative standards of "polite" society, codes and standard practices were established that sought to uphold a baseline level of propriety, decency, and respect across media. While every medium was not formally regulated, those that were created a general atmosphere that little tolerated any content that strayed beyond the established lines of propriety generally seen as normative. The relationship between societal norms was recursive, as well: while those norms informed what was permitted broadcast, what was found in media had a strong affect on what was considered normative.

The most formalized code of content standards was established by and for the movie industry. By the late 1920's numerous states and cities had established their own content codes with censorship boards to enforce them, and the film industry was straining under the requirements of tailoring films to meet the standards of each market; for maximum efficiency and profit, Hollywood wanted a national distribution system that delivered a uniform product. In addition, there was a movement to create a Federal

¹² By "modern media" I mean the forms of mass-access visual media that owe their existence to electricity; i.e. television, cinema, the World Wide Web.

ensorship standard crafted by lawmakers in Washington. Hollywood executives saw that a national standard would actually be to their benefit, but they were anxious both to craft it themselves and for it to not be legally binding (Wu 2010).

William H. Hays, a Presbyterian elder and former Postmaster General, had been employed by the Hollywood studios since 1922 to help improve the image of Hollywood fare, but by 1929 had done more in the way of soothing public relations work than actual cleanup of content. That year Martin Quigley, the Catholic editor of Hollywood trade paper *The Motion Picture Herald*, teamed up with Jesuit priest Daniel A. Lord to create a code of standards. Hays immediately endorsed this code, and with a few revisions the studios decided to accept it as long as it was voluntary. However filmmakers flaunted the code, the first censors were largely ineffective, and as a result the content of films hardly changed (Black 1996).

In 1933, Christian leaders formed the National Legion of Decency¹³ over concerns with “the massacre of innocence in youth” and urged a campaign for “purification of the cinema”. Originally an interfaith organization that included Jewish and Protestant clerics, it soon became an exclusively Catholic organization operated in close league with Church leadership. The Legion exerted considerable pressure on Hollywood directly and on politicians, and again studio executives elected to act before they were forced to by legislation. In 1934 an amendment was added to the Production Code creating the Production Code Administration, and Joseph Breen was appointed as

¹³ In 2001, The National Legion of Decency was rolled into the Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Office for Film and Broadcasting, and disbanded (Walsh 1996). Its mandate has been emulated since 1962 by Morality in Media, formed by Father Morton A. Hill and other clergy to oppose “pornography and indecency through public education and application of the law” (MoralityInMedia.org), and The Parents Television Council, founded in 1995 (and allegedly using the Legion as a model for their charter) (Lane 2006).

its head. The Production Code was more popularly referred to as the “Hays Code”, and the Production Administration as the “Breen Office” (Black 1996).

Two of the twelve sections of the Production Code directly concern the presentation of religion by the film industry:

V. Profanity – Pointed profanity (this includes the words God, Lord, Jesus, Christ - unless used reverently - Hell, S.O.B., damn, Gawd), or every other profane or vulgar expression however used, is forbidden.

VIII. Religion

- 1. No film or episode may throw ridicule on any religious faith.*
- 2. Ministers of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains.*
- 3. Ceremonies of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled. (ArtsReformation.com)*

During Breen’s administration, from 1934 to 1954, the Code was enforced strictly and nearly without compromise. Nudity, profanity, and miscegenation were eliminated, crime was characterized as evil and profitless, and violence was minimized without gore. Religion was treated with kid gloves, if it was treated at all, and parody or disrespect was never allowed to touch religious (particularly Christian) clerics, believers, practices, or religious influences on society generally. The Code was officially maintained until 1968, but had gradually weakened after 1952 when the Supreme Court ruled that films were protected as free speech by the first amendment (Black 1996).

Besides the direct effect the Code had in preventing any kind of religious humor in films, it set the tone for the content of all modern media. Television was developed

during the most restrictive years of Joseph Breen's administration, and as a sight and sound medium with a strong analogy to film its content standards were strongly affected by the Code, even though television producers did not directly answer to Breen. As a national medium, film also presented a normative standard of propriety and custom that permeated performance and entertainment of every variety.

It is unsurprising that the Code demanded a strict respect for religion when one considers it was written by religious leaders, informed by religious conceptions of correct morality, and was adopted under the leadership of an active member of a Christian denomination. While the Code seems to be primarily remembered today as a mechanism for preventing rough language and prurience, sections V and VIII demonstrate that it was also used as a vehicle to protect the interests of those that drafted it.

Television is another censored medium, more formally censored than film. While the film industry was allowed to regulate itself, television was considered too invasive of private homes and therefore regulated by the federal government from the beginning. Originally formed to regulate radio in 1934, the Federal Communications Commission (F.C.C.) continues to keep a close eye on what is acceptable on television. The F.C.C. has never published specific guidelines for what they find to be appropriate and inoffensive content, preferring a "we know it when we see it" stance reminiscent of Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of obscenity.

Outside of the broadcasting of religious services and preaching, religion has been a rare topic on television broadcast in the United States for a general audience (Hoover 2006). Some of the more memorable and successful exceptions have featured Catholic characters pushing the boundaries of their traditional roles: *Sarge* (1971) featured a police

detective who becomes a priest; the title character of *Father Murphy* (1981-1983) pretended to be a priest; and *The Father Dowling Mysteries* (1987-1981) pivoted on a priest who does detective work. A few successful shows were non-denominational yet still Christian: *Highway to Heaven* (1984-1989) starred Michael Landon portraying Jonathan Smith, an angel whose assignment is to help ordinary mortals through difficult times; *Touched By An Angel* (1994-2003) featured a similar premise.

Comedies featuring religion have been even more rare. *The Flying Nun* (1967-1970) was a situation comedy, but the humor was centered on the misadventures of a nun who could fly rather than on aspects of faith or practice. *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983) included the Father Mulcahy character, whose kindly ministrations functioned as counterpoint to the black humor used as a coping mechanism at a Korean War surgical hospital. *Amen* (1986-1991) featured a church deacon whose foolishness frequently got him into trouble.

The legacy of the Breen Code may well have been stronger on television standards than on those of the film industry that it actually regulated. With the exception of the posited airfoil properties of the habit worn by Sister Bertrille in *The Flying Nun*, and perhaps the minor blasphemy suggested by the occasional dishonesty of *Amen*'s Deacon Frye, none of the above comedies or dramas were irreverent or critical of religious belief, practice, or institutions. Instead, they used the religious character either as an analogue for a deific, positive force in the lives of humankind, or to set off the conflicts inherent in trying to maintain both religious and secular sensibilities. This has held true until the appearance of the two contemporary shows mentioned earlier, *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, which together represent a complete liberation from Hays' legacy of conservative moral standards and censorship.

Certainly the current televisual landscape reflects serious change since the days of the Breen Code. In *The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank writes that television is now “a 24-hour carnival, a showplace of transgression and immersion of values, of humiliated patriarchs and shocked puritans, of screaming guitars and concupiscent youth, of fashions that are uniformly defiant, of cars that violate convention and shoes that let ‘us be us’” (1998). The consumer culture as it is reflected on television is now filled with filtered ideas and imagery of rebellion, liberation, and revolution from previous subcultures, especially the countercultural left of the Sixties.

However, until roughly 1970, religious humor was a rare commodity in the media. It wasn't in the cinema, it wasn't on television, it wasn't in the periodical press.¹⁴ One could imagine that its absence was simply a factor of there being no market for such fare, and perhaps that's so. Two important points counter that argument, however: 1) Without any material to supply a market, the existence of such a market would be irrelevant (and unidentifiable); 2) The “demand” that customarily establishes a market, which entrepreneurs then rush to satisfy, would have been stifled by the social norms of the day that forbade mocking religion. The situation is almost circular in its self-reification: social norms forbid religious humor, so there was no market for it and none was produced, and its absence reinforced the normative certainty that it should be

¹⁴ This study might seem deficient for its notable lack of attention to religious satire in literature. This venerable tradition, going back at least as far as ancient Greece, is beyond the scope of this study for two reasons: 1) While it is true that any literate person can go to the library and read Aristophanes, Voltaire, and Swift, those who do are a limited group; this study addresses modern mass-media that is pervasive and significantly shapes American popular cultural norms. 2) As an old tradition that continues to endure, literary religious satire does not inform the “turn” in performance standards whose nature I theorize here. It is, in effect, a background constant. Although that background must play some part in “authorizing” any specific instance of religious satire, its effect is so subtle as to have been effectively ignored by the dons of mass media during the first half of the 20th century.

unavailable. This internal reinforcement of the standard helps to explain the extreme reactions engendered by a man who would challenge its premises.

Lenny Bruce & The End of Blasphemy

“All great truths begin as blasphemies” – George Bernard Shaw, 1919

In 2014 the practice of making fun of religion is legal, popular, and increasingly tolerated in American society as a whole. One can catch jokes made at the expense of religious leaders, at the tenets of every denomination, at expressions of faith and practice on television, in the cinema, and on the World Wide Web. This was not always so: until fairly recently, it was easier to get one’s hands on pornography than sharp religious satire. When and how did this change? I argue that the turning point was the mid-Sixties, and it was the comedic performances of Lenny Bruce, as well as the public persecution he endured because of them, that signaled the current era wherein religious humor is tolerated as an acceptable portion of the freedom of speech principle. Bruce’s story is also illustrative for the snapshot it provides of just how socially unacceptable religious humor was in the United States until fairly recently.

Lenny Bruce was born Leonard Alfred Schneider in 1925 and grew up in Long Island, New York. He volunteered for the Navy in 1942 at age 17, and aboard the U.S.S. *Brooklyn* spent three years at war in the Mediterranean. He participated in six invasions, notably the bloody campaigns at Anzio and Salerno, and won several commendations. However, as soon as the war was over he wanted out of the service. He had a shipmate make a WAVES uniform in which he coyly promenaded on deck at night, and once told the ship’s medical officer he was having homosexual urges. He was quickly mustered out with a dishonorable discharge, but since he had not been found guilty of violating any

U.S. Navy regulation his discharge was changed to “Under Honorable Conditions by Reason of Unsuitability for The Naval Service” (Thomas 1989).

Bruce went to work perfecting his stand-up routine. His venues were dive nightclubs, burlesque theaters, anyplace where he could get a gig for a week or two. He bounced primarily between the East and West coasts: mostly New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and also Chicago. His routines were raw, free form, and different; every night he would work in new material along with established routines. Audiences either loved him or hated him, and regulars were matched in number by walkouts. No topic was sacred, no audience member safe from commentary, no word too profane. Bruce became increasingly popular, until he was commanding fees as high as \$7500 weekly (Bruce 1992). In 1958 he appeared on the Steve Allen Show, where he immediately went off-script with a joke about whether Elizabeth Taylor’s impending marriage to Eddie Fisher meant she would go through with a Bat Mitzvah (Thomas 1989).

In 1961 Bruce was arrested on an obscenity charge. At a performance at the Jazz Workshop in San Francisco he used the word “cocksucker” and went on an extended riff concerning the meanings of “to” and “come”. At the trial, an officer testified to being offended at a joke regarding two religious figures (“What would happen if Christ and Moses appeared one Sunday at St. Patrick’s?”). The defense answered that particular line of inquiry by quoting an article praising Bruce that mentioned the very joke in question; the article had been written by Nat Hentoff and printed in *Commonweal*, a Catholic magazine. Bruce was acquitted, but from that point on his legal troubles were continuous (Bruce 1992). As Bruce himself reasoned:

I guess what happens is, if you get arrested in Town A and then Town B – with a lot of publicity – then when you get to Town C they *have* to arrest you or what kind of a shithouse town are *they* running?¹⁵ (Bruce 1992 p141-2) [emphases original]

Bruce's later 1962 arrest in Chicago illustrates how the obscenity charges were often a cover for the blasphemous remarks that were the legal establishment's genuine grievance. Chicago at that time was roughly 61% Catholic, a predominance reflected in the staffing of the police department (Bruce 1992).¹⁶ Bruce was arrested for obscenity; among the offending bits was one where he held up a photo of a nude woman (a page from a calendar being sold at newsstands on the arresting officer's beat), and in declaring that there was nothing wrong with admiring her form said: "It's God, your filthy Jesus Christ, made these tits!" (Bruce 1992 p142). The official complaint focuses not on use of profanity, or displaying pornography, but on Bruce's (perceived) insult of the clergy and the church. *Variety* reported:

...the prosecutor is at least equally concerned with Bruce's indictments of organized religion as he is with the more obvious sexual content of the comic's act. It's possible that Bruce's comments on the Catholic Church have hit sensitive nerves in Chicago's Catholic-oriented administration and police department... (Bruce 1992 p96)

¹⁵ By 1965, Bruce had been arrested for obscenity 19 times (Nachman 2003 p418).

¹⁶ According to Bruce's account, 47 of the 50 people in the jury pool were Catholic, and the selected jury was entirely Catholic. The judge was Catholic. The prosecutor and his assistant were Catholic (Bruce 1992 p146-7).

While on bail Bruce continued to perform his routine, and police took down notes at every show. Eventually they managed to not only run Bruce out of town but also close down the club where he had been performing his act (Goldman 1974).

By 1956 Bruce had developed a ten-minute act he called “Religions, Inc.”, his most popular and oft-performed routine (Nachman 2003):

And now we go to the headquarters of Religions, Inc., where the Dodge-Plymouth dealers have just had their annual raffle, and they have just given away a 1958 Catholic Church. And seated around the desk are the religious leaders of our country. We hear one of them. He’s addressing the tight little group in Littletown, Connecticut (Madison Avenue is getting a little trite). “Well, as you know, this year we’ve got a tie-in with Oldsmobile. Now, gentlemen, I don’t expect any of you boys to get out there in the pulpit and hard sell an automobile. That is ridiculous. But I was thinking, now. What do you say to this? If just every once in a while, if we’d throw in a few little terms, just little things like, uh, ‘Drive the car that He’d drive!’ – and you know, you don’t have to lay it on, just zing it in there once in a while and then jump maybe to the Philistines. (Bruce 1992 p96)

The premise was a meeting of top religious leaders at the headquarters of “Religions, Incorporated”¹⁷. The imagined conclave has 6,000 attendees, with specific persons featured including Billy Graham; “H.A”, the spokesman of the group; a number of anonymous and invented preacher characters including one intentionally portrayed as African-American; Cardinal Spellman and Bishop Richard Sheen of the Catholic church; and Pope John XXIII on the phone. H.A. announces important issues facing the group, and other characters chime in as appropriate. In the privacy of their gathering, the leaders

¹⁷ All subsequent quotations and summaries of Lenny Bruce’s “Religions, Inc” routine are my own transcription from audio tape performances available on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMdsD-MoWRY>

are frank about their “real” occupations, as if religion is all show business, performance, and grift.

In the routine the leaders talk about what’s working for them (“*Mr. Nickaya at the religious novelty house in Chicago has a beautiful seller, a genuine Jewish-star-lucky-cross-and-cigarette-lighter combined, as well as a kiss-me-in-the-dark mezoozoo [mezuzah]*”), report growth (“...*Catholicism is up nine points, Judaism up fifteen, and the Big P, the Pentecostals, are really starting to move...*”), and share “*the beautiful color slides*” Mr. Acton of the Seventh-Day-Adventists “*took on his tour of the leper colonies*”. There is a reminder that “*The Commissioner has promised no individual hustling, because if we burn ourselves where we gonna end up, you dig?*”. Within the routine the leaders speak with a lot of “sweetie” this, “baby” that, “groovy” and “dig it”, as if they are all hipster refugees from a Vegas lounge act.

The routine ends with a phone conversation between “H.A.” and the recently elected Pope John XXIII, where (except for one brief line) the audience can only hear H.A.’s side of the conversation. The material seems fairly tame by current standards, but (evidently) was risqué to the point of civic blasphemy at the time. The transcript below provides a sense not only of the material, but the delivery style as well (ellipses represent the pauses during which one is to imagine Pope John speaking):

Hello, Johnny! What’s shakin’, baby? Boy, it’s really been an election month, hasn’t it, sweetie? Well, listen, I hate to.... Yeah, the puff of white smoke knocked me out! We got an eight-page layout with Viceroy [cigarettes]. ‘The New Pope Is A Thinking Man’... Yeah, well if you wanted to go for the tattoo but I figure the hell with it.... It would have been too far out...I thought so, yeah... Uh-huh...Listen, I hate to bug yeah but they’re bugging us again with that dumb integration...Nah, I don’t know why the hell they wanna go to school

either... Yeah, that school bus scene...yeah well we had to give 'em the bus but there's two toilets on each bus...They're bugging us, saying "Get the religious leaders, make 'em talk about it" ...huh?...I know it, but they're getting' hep...yes...no, they say they don't want no more quotations from the Bible, they want us to come out and Say things...they want us to say "let Them go to school with Them!" ...no, I did "walking across the water" and "snake into the cane" ...they don't wanna hear that jazz anymore...and that "stop war" jazz every time the bomb scare, yeah...they keep saying "thou shalt not kill" means that and not "amend section A" ...yes...they don't want the bomb...sure they're commies!...no I ain't getting' snotty, we gotta DO something...yeah, I got two...yeah, we got some people on our side...we got Scotman Caruthers and step-and-fetch-it...Don't do no good! Yes...that's why I called! What're we gonna do?! (The Pope mumbles something in Latin) Sure, that's easy for you to say! But you're over there...yeah, I know...and thanks for the pepperoni... yeah...[aside] hey Billy, you wanna say something to him? [back to the phone] Billy [Graham] wants to know if you can get him one of those Dago sports cars? A Ferairboo or some dumb thing... When you coming to the Coast?...the valley, it's hot but we'll fix you...yeah...that's cool, yeah... I'll get you the Sullivan show the nineteenth. Yeah, send me some eight-by-ten glossies...yeah..just..it's a good television show...Just wave, that's all... Wear the big ring. Yeah...the ratings, we can fix that...yeah, I'm sorry about that...no no, I'm cool now...yeah, Billy-Joe says hello...yeah... Oh, did you dig [Cardinal] Spellman on "Stars of Jazz!"?...yeah...yeah...uh-huh...ok sweetie...yeah...you too latoos... no, nobody knows you're Jewish.

Another routine was a prison-film parody called "The Triumph of Father Flotsky", who acts as a negotiator after the inmates have taken 18 guards hostage. Eventually he defuses the situation by promising that the prison will open a gay bar "in the west wing" and allow the inmate leader, "Dutch", exclusive right to be the prison's Avon representative (Bruce c1959). Bruce had another regular bit about Jews still taking

heat for Jesus' death, how there ought to be a statute of limitations. To "clear the air" he would admit the Jews did kill Jesus; he knew this for certain because he had found a note in the basement from "Uncle Morty" admitting that it was actually their own family who had done the deed (Bruce 1992).

Bruce regularly referred in his routines to the sexual adventures of priests having sex with nuns, priests having sex with housewives, nuns having sex with about anybody, as if it were a common and merely winked-at reality that the church hid a sexual free-for-all (Bruce 1992).¹⁸ With Bruce there was a pervasive irreverence; even the dedication to his autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, was used to poke fun at Christianity:

I dedicate this book to all the followers of Christ and his teachings; in particular to a true Christian – Jimmy Hoffa – because he hired ex-convicts as, I assume, Christ would have. (Bruce 1992)

There are too many examples to provide a comprehensive survey here, but Bruce peppered all of his routines with jokes and observations that made light of religious institutions generally, or mocked their influence. He talked about how he'd rather his kid watch stag films than violent movies depicting religious history; his reasoning was that if kids do indeed emulate what they see, "he'd rather his daughter made love than go out and kill Jesus again" (Bruce 1992). Bruce incorporated irreverence for anything having to do with Judaism or Christianity (mostly Catholicism) into his routines. One of Bruce's oft-quoted gems was: "Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God" (Nachman 2003).

¹⁸ Even Lenny Bruce never brought up the possibility of pedophilia.

Robert Weide, writer and producer of the Emmy-winning documentary *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth* (1998), agrees that most of the time it was not the obscenity and language that caused police and district attorneys to go after Bruce, it was the insult to religion.

Language wasn't what they went after Lenny for, that was just the loophole.

Although obscenity was technically illegal, blasphemy was not. So you couldn't go after a guy for talking about the pope but you *could* get after him for saying 'fuck' (Nachman 2003 p414). [emphasis original]

Certainly there were those that took offense at Bruce's use of salty language, but it was not as if he were the only one using the offending words; the San Francisco officer who arrested Bruce for saying "cocksucker" admitted on the stand that it was a word his fellow officers frequently used at the station house. The authorities hounded Bruce because he was a heretic. A heretic is a critic who sees and acknowledges choices apart from dogma, choices of what to believe, whom to follow, what to count among the "real" and what to discard as no-longer-valid social construction. Extending that heresy by sharing it with others was an unpardonable sin to those who would protect the status quo and the institutions counted on to maintain it.

Bruce was not merely a comedian, shilling whatever would get him a laugh and earn him a buck. His performance routines, and to some extent his life, demonstrate that he was essentially a social satirist, using comedy to point up the absurdities of social institutions. He saw religion as being ripe for satire, its leaders fat targets who wielded social influence with little regard for potential hypocrisy and whose stature in society could use a thorough airing-out. His collaborator William Thomas wrote: "Lenny was

fascinated that religion was the ultimate taboo to many people, despite the fact that its history was as filled with corruption as that of any other power in society” (Thomas 1989).

Poet Nat Hentoff called Bruce “the evangelist of the new morality” (Nachman 2003 p415). William Thomas, who wrote material with Bruce for a decade, titled the book he wrote about his friend *Lenny Bruce: The Making of a Prophet*. Examining what Bruce did to question the role of organized religion, these small hyperboles don’t seem unreasonable: in a very real sense, he did introduce a new morality that allowed for challenges to be leveled at its traditional keepers. Interestingly, though, Bruce himself wasn’t always so impressed; but, he *did* think about his craft in spiritual terms:

Sometimes I look in the fun house mirror at the carnival. I see myself as a profound, incisive wit, concerned with man’s inhumanity to man. Then I stroll to the next mirror and I see a pompous ass whose humor is hardly spiritual.

(Nachman 2003 p415)

Lenny Bruce created a space in which it is ok to make fun of anything, using any language, as long as somebody is willing to pay to listen. He also reinvigorated and modernized for the present media age a very old tradition that seems to require periodic re-invention and re-introduction: comedy as social satire. This is the tradition of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, Voltaire’s *Candide*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, even Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*. Bruce used his routines to poke holes in the social constructions of his time that were either entirely absurd or at least included absurdity, issues that few were willing to talk about. However, these issues (such as society’s discomfort with images of the human body, its prurience regarding any

sexual issue whatsoever, the freight and import attached to words that we conventionalize as “dirty” or “obscene”, all forms of pretense, and the airs put on by the powerful) were treated by plenty of other comedians and commentators (though perhaps not as well as Bruce handled them).

Bruce was virtually alone, though, in taking on obvious religious contradictions: the incompatibility of Christianity with warfare and belligerence; contrasts between the principles of religion and the fruits of a career teaching them; the poverty of many who follow Christ and the wealth of those who claim to maintain His legacy; a morality that values industrial progress as laudable but condemns images of the nude human body as depraved. Before Lenny Bruce, these issues were rarely aired via entertainment in popular culture; judging by both the praise and condemnation his work engendered, religion was/is something many people have strong feelings about, and are either curious to hear aired or very keen to keep under wraps.

Bruce was the last performer in the United States to be tried for obscenity (Nachman 2003 p391). His time in the limelight was only about eight years, but he made a lasting impression upon the comedy profession. Bruce paved the way for comedians like Richard Pryor, George Carlin, and Lewis Black who have gone on to use comedy as social satire in order to point out absurdity and wake people from lethargy. Sometimes, though, those who have followed Bruce have overused the privilege of free expression that Bruce won for them.¹⁹ Lawrence Christon (of *Variety*) wrote:

Nightclub comics set free in the Bruce legacy can now *shpritz* their dull

obscenities unendingly without fear of reprisal; practically none, however, seems

¹⁹ Unfortunately, he also paved the way for performers (i.e. Howard Stern, Andrew Dice Clay, Sam Kinison) whose coarse language is not used to make a point, but frequently is itself their only point.

willing or able to go after America's institutional thought and prevailing social currents. (Nachman 2003 p435)

Vitaly, Bruce was the vanguard figure for a loosening up of society's tolerance for making fun of religion, religious figures, and religious customs. There is still plenty of backlash against humor made at the expense of religions and spirituality from the religiously observant who take offense, but society at large no longer reacts to such remarks; it certainly no longer puts people in jail. This little revolution has now progressed so far, via the internet, that not only is humor at the expense of religion very popular, but there is a great deal of religious humor being published *by* religious organizations and ministries. I don't see how Bruce could have anticipated the latter, but if he were still alive I'm sure he'd find a way to make fun of it.

The popular mythology that today surrounds the figure of Lenny Bruce does not include his opening up of religious humor; this central aspect of his legacy seems to have been forgotten. I suspect this is because of the thorough success of what he accomplished. Bruce felt he had a right to mock anything to do with religion, but it was not his mission in life to make it socially/legally acceptable to do so. Nevertheless, by constantly pushing his agenda and aggressively fighting off censorship in court, he succeeded in ending the persecution of those who criticize, mock, or simply make light of any aspect of religion in society. In the 21st century, religious humor can still raise eyebrows, but it is inconceivable that a comedian (or the producer of a film, television program, or website) would be arrested and sentenced to four months in a workhouse for offering such fare. Before Lenny Bruce, public religious humor was punishable by law; after Bruce, it was

not. It was his work around which the change pivoted, his legacy that authorizes *South Park* and *Saved!* and StartYourOwnCult.com.

Popularity Of Religious Humor Today

Religious humor is more widespread, and thus seems more popular, today than it did in the respective eras of Joseph Breen and Lenny Bruce. This is partly the result of loosening cultural standards, of course, but more so the increased ability to publish that the digital sphere provides since “mainstream” media outlets such as television and film and radio, however, reflect this change only marginally.

Religious humor is offered to American audiences primarily by way of television, movies, and the internet. The least of these is television: there are still few shows that overtly offer comedy that pivots on religion. Among the few, however, are two of the most popular and successful series, *The Simpsons* (1989-) and *South Park* (1997-) which both offer irreverent and frequently ribald vignettes that center on religious faith and ruthlessly mock both clerical figures and the particularly devout. *South Park* has been especially bold, satirizing Judaism, Christianity, and Scientology with a no-holds-barred approach that leaves little doubt about the writers’ willingness to go as far as their imaginations lead. It is notable that these two shows, which employ religious humor far more than any others on American television, are both animated; the additional level of abstraction, the extra remove from verisimilitude that animation offers, provides the characters (and by proxy their creators) more freedom to be irreverent. Live action characters on American television take the occasional potshot at religion, but no live action comedy makes a religious theme the center of a series or episode. The Irish series *Father Ted* (1995-1998), produced for Britain’s Channel 4 and featuring the ridiculous

antics of three banished Catholic priests, is a great example of what such a series looks like but was never broadcast in the U.S., and it has no American analogue.

Film is so far a richer medium for religious humor than television, with a longer and more consistent record of exhibiting religious satire and parody. Early examples *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) poked holes in Christian history and the story of Christ with zany humor and flagrant irreverence. George Burns and John Denver brought us a deity with a mischievous sense of humor in *Oh, God!* (1977), with sequels in 1980 and 1984. Dudley Moore in *Wholly Moses!* (1980) and Mel Brooks' *History of the World Part I* (1981) re-wrote biblical history to include phallic jokes and theologies based on little more than serendipity. Whoopi Goldberg's *Sister Act* films (1992 and 1993) made irreverent (though ultimately redemptive) comedy of nuns and the convent, while John Travolta in *Michael* (1996) gave us a reprobate angel more interested in booze and women than in shepherding souls. *Dogma* (1999) pointed out the absurdities of theological language; *Saved!* (2004) made light work of the lifestyle choices of evangelical Christians; *The Ten* (2007) mocked the ten commandments of the Hebrew Bible. Satire has not been limited to dramatic presentation, either: Bill Maher's *Religulous* (2008) is a scathing documentary that makes no effort to hide contempt for not only religious practice but also the very notion that anyone might be foolish enough to maintain a religious sentiment in our "modern", scientific age.²⁰

More than by any other medium, religious humor flourishes on the World Wide Web. A Google search for "religious humor" yields 4.66 million hits; "religious satire"

²⁰ Other examples of the religious satire filmic genre are: *Sister Mary Explains It All* (2001), *Bruce Almighty* (2003), *Borat* (2006), *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* (2006), *Evan Almighty* (2007), and *Salvation Boulevard* (2011).

gets 14.4 million; “Christian humor” gets 8.6 million; “Islamic humor” gets 2.22 million.²¹ While religious humor as presented on television and in cinema comes from a critical perspective where the jokester stands outside of the religion and is laughing “at” the religious object, on the internet this is not always so. Religious humor websites fit into at least one (and frequently two or more) of five groups: anti-religious, pro-religious, social networking, bias-neutral religious humor sites, and general comedy/parody sites that often include religion. GodIsGoofy.com and UnFollowingJesus.com are rabidly atheist and critical, but GatewayToJesus.com is a Christian ministry site that offers corny jokes poking gentle fun at believers and church alike. Facebook has dozens of pages that run from pro- to anti-religious content. StartYourOwnCult.com is a bizarre parody website offering advice like “Building your compound” and “Is castration right for your cult?”; IslamicHumorUnhinged is rather like an Islamic version of TheOnion parody newspaper. General comedy sites like Cracked.com and TheOnion.com regularly feature stories that pivot on religious figures, religious beliefs and practices, and claims that God has recently spoken concerning some topic in the news.

How frequently various religious traditions are treated on the internet seems roughly in line with the tradition’s prevalence among the population. It is no surprise, then, that most religious humor websites with the American .com, .net, and .org domains are focused on Christianity. There are also a disproportionate number that focus on Judaism, which is unsurprising considering the long tradition of humor within the Jewish community. Perhaps surprising, though, is the large number of Islamic humor sites; while many atheist and nationalist websites offer a brutal commentary on Islam, these are

²¹ Search results obtained April 23, 2012 at 1:30p.m. These numbers change monthly; results from an identical search on January 9, 2011 indicate an increase in search results of an average 7% across these specific search terms.

counterbalanced by sites sponsored by mosques and Islamic cultural organizations that make light fun of Muslims and Islamic congregations. Without fail these sites also include a page or two of restrictions, gleaned from Qur'an and Hadith, that make clear what is acceptable within Islamic humor and what is not. The jokes that result are remarkably similar to those featured on Protestant ministry sites, e.g. making fun of preacher eccentricities or the never-ending tension concerning donations to the church/mosque budget.

There are currently no printed periodicals that I could locate devoted to religious humor, and it seems that in the United States there has only ever been one. *The Wittenburg Door* (the misspelling is intentional) was published from 1971 until 2008, and featured intelligent and clever parody of mostly Protestant Christianity. *The Door* (as it was usually referred to) billed itself as “The World’s Pretty Much Only Religious Satire Magazine”, and it was. Aside from that defunct periodical, the print edition of *The Onion* continues to offer religious satire, though not as often as the online edition with its more open format.

Summary

Scholarship concerning the holy fool tradition within Christianity shows that the use of the ludic to abet Christian ideology is a legitimate and historically grounded mode of Christian practice. The history of the Hollywood Production Code and the Federal Communications Commission demonstrates that the broadcasting of religious humor has until recently been very tightly controlled, if not outright forbidden. That Lenny Bruce was principally persecuted for blasphemy, as recently as the mid 60's, shows that resistance to Christian humor in this country has until recently been very strong indeed.

Chapter Five: LarkNews.com

LarkNews.com is a satirical website that uses humor to address elements of Christian belief, practice, and culture. It lampoons Christianity by varying degrees as a way towards serving as an alternative mode for believers and seekers to constructively engage with the Christian faith. Although proprietor/writer Joel Kilpatrick denies any such intent, many of the articles seem to constitute morality tales that might motivate readers to examine how their beliefs and practices can go awry.

Some LarkNews articles use mildly counter-hierarchical, sacrilegious, and transgressive themes, but for the most part use humor to position their characters outside the accepted boundaries of Christianity and into a critical “second space” that allows for a fully detached perspective on the faith. These articles carry their satire to absurd lengths that ultimately serve to illustrate how the transgressed elements are valuable for both individuals and for society at large, thereby supporting Christianity by way of mockery.

Through textual analysis of the LarkNews site and Joel Kilpatrick’s book, and interviews with him, I have determined that the most important self-imposed limits against “Going Too Far” are: 1) that the existence of God, the “truth” of Christian theology, and the validity of the Christian church are not to be challenged (ever!) and 2) that articles are to reflect a love for all human beings. The primary elements towards “Going Far Enough” are that the pieces elicit humility among Christians and an acknowledgment that Christianity is inherently funny.

LarkNews is an example of how laypeople are changing the landscape of Christianity in America, via the digital sphere, by expanding the oeuvre for how their religion can be addressed (i.e. the ludic) and by increasing the bottom up, dialogic nature

of their relationship to church hierarchies. That it uses worship practices, traditional teachings, and Biblical scripture to do so constitutes something of a “convergence culture” phenomena for how it increases the Christian “text” via its rewriting of traditional narratives.

“‘Proverbs 31 husband’ justifies beer habit”

MINOT, N.D. — Jack Crocker, a beer-loving machinist and “part-time Christian,” finally agreed to read Proverbs with wife Reanna. He’s glad he did. “I’m a Proverbs 31 husband all right,” says Jack, then quotes Proverbs 31:6-7: “Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.” “That’s my permission to crack open a cold one,” Jack says, having a Coors after dinner.

But Reanna, a new church member, is pushing Jack hard to stop drinking. She insists he is neither “perishing” nor “in anguish.” But Jack researched the Bible on the Internet and found 2 Corinthians 4:16 and 5:2 which says, “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day,” and “Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.” “Everyone is perishing and in anguish,” Jack says. “Until we’re delivered from these bodies, the Bible says to drink up.”

As part of the escalating family tension he created a “Proverbs 31” category on their weekly budget and listed “beer” under it. He also wants to start a Proverbs 31 Men’s Group with his buddies.

“We’re trying to find where the Bible talks about buffalo wings,” he says. (LarkNews.com 598²²)

This is an example of a “news” story featured on the LarkNews website. The setup typifies the kind of narrative that LarkNews offers: a fairly brief human-interest

²² In the interests of clarity and brevity I have cited the LarkNews articles using only the number assigned to them by their publisher; the full url is www.larknews.com/archives/###.

type piece about how religious beliefs play out in the everyday lives of selected American Christians. Of course the people featured in the story are fictitious, and the “article” broadly straddles the genres of satire²³ and farce²⁴ in how it points up the ridiculousness of a situation that has been intentionally crafted as absurd.

“Proverbs 31 husband” manages to convey a feeling of verisimilitude through incorporating both authentic and stereotypical elements. The passages quoted from the Bible are genuine, word-for-word English translations from the New International Version; that they are drawn from two different books of the Bible (indeed from both the Hebrew Bible [Old Testament] and Christian Bible [New Testament]) lends the scriptural citations an air of learned authority, as if to assure the reader that the author (aliased as “Jack”) has spent some time learning his scripture. That the titular husband is a machinist who chooses to drink inexpensive mass-market beer signals that he represents a stereotypical blue-collar man, whose interest in using religion to justify potential beer-and-buffalo-wings nights with his buddies is to almost be expected considering his plebian station in life. Reanna plays the more virtuous half of the couple, trying in vain to get her husband to join in her new spiritual interests and lead a more virtuous life. The “escalating tension” in the household is a familiar trope of husband-and-wife domestic negotiation, readily familiar to television viewers whether theirs is the era of *The Honeymooners* (1955-6), of *Roseanne* (1988-97), or of *Modern Family* (2009-).

²³ Satire: a way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc.; humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc.; a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn (Merriam-Webster.com^b).

²⁴ Farce: a funny play or movie about ridiculous situations and events; the style of humor that occurs in a farce; something that is so bad that it is seen as ridiculous; a light dramatic composition marked by broadly satirical comedy and improbable plot; an empty or patently ridiculous act, proceeding, or situation (Merriam-Webster.com^a).

The piece makes clear fun of some of the cultural practices and personal habits of Christian believers. The first potshot is at “part-time Christians”, presumably those who incorporate religious practices into their lives only on those occasions when it suits them, suggesting an insincerity that is antithetical to calls for Christians to incorporate their ideologies consistently and into every aspect of their lives. Immediately Jack is suspect as a true believer, a notion confirmed when he uses the Bible as nothing more than justification for his indulgent drinking. The story forges almost explicit comedy from the practice of strict literal biblical interpretation, of some Christians’ habit of using the Bible as a life-manual that addresses every contingency to the distinct convenience of its interpreter. At the same time that the story implies by its use of scripture that the Bible is an appropriate (perhaps *the* appropriate) source of wisdom, it suggests that scripture can nevertheless be a dangerous tool in the hands of the insincere or the venal.

There is also some love here though, an undertone of wry affection, as if the writer were indeed crafting a television sitcom based on people s/he cares about. The wife is exasperated but not nagging, not laying down ultimatums, presumably tolerating the beer and its line item in the budget while she works to discourage her husband’s vices. The husband is not belligerent, and offers no harm to anyone save potentially himself; he’s just a regular guy trying to work out a way to feel good while complying with the values system that his wife has introduced into the marriage. These are familiar people, *our people*, stand-ins for the plebian masses, the marrieds and working stiffs and middle-class folks who use their amateur coping mechanisms as crutches to get through life as best they can. Yes, they are Christians, but they just as imperfect and frail as

anyone else, no more venal nor innocent than the reader. No more venal nor innocent than any ten people s/he might know from the neighborhood or from the local church.

Note also what is absent from this ludic tableau: harsh language; obscenity; name-calling; violence. Even the sense that Jack is behaving irresponsibly is tempered by his bothering to duly make space for his newly justified beer habit in the family budget.

There is no sense that anything evil or irredeemable has occurred or is likely to, but only that Jack and his wife have a way to go if they are going to successfully live their lives as examples of puritanical Christian propriety.

“Proverbs 31 husband”, offered as it is within the satirical Christian space that is LarkNews, is an example of participating in Christianity through the ludic. On its face the piece is critical of American Christians for (in some cases) being only partially committed to their beliefs, for using their sacred text (i.e. the Bible) as justification for indulgent pleasures of the flesh, and for their sometimes practice of using literal interpretation of that same Bible as a guide to contemporary situations regardless of their correlation with the original story’s context. Such criticism might ordinarily be interpreted as an effort to denigrate Christian practice, and by extension the theology / ideology that inspires it, thus to discourage readers from continuing to embrace it or from embracing it to begin with. That the husband uses scripture to justify beer consumption, rather than a guide to approach the Divine, is mildly sacreligious and would be taken as apostasy among Christian communities who associate temperance with proper Christian observance; as such, his interpretation is also counter-heirarchical, and incorporates a gleeful “playfulness” into the way he approaches his faith’s sacred text.

However there are two factors that indicate its purpose is not critical, but reifying. For the first the piece is offered within the LarkNews site, a space that is consistently dedicated to the support of Christianity (see below); intentional denigration of the faith would be inconsistent with both its charter and its history, so an alternative purpose is most likely at play. For the second, taken in light of the first, the story acts as a mini morality play where the moral is implied, like a syllogism missing its conclusion: Jack uses the Bible to justify his Coors habit; Jack's use of scripture is kind of absurd, which seems distasteful; therefore, I (the reader) shouldn't use scripture in an absurd way as justification for just any old activity that pleases me. The story actually reifies appropriate Christian practice in much the same way that the Lenten carnival identified by Bakhtin reified Christian practice as a functional result of outwardly mocking it.

The "Proverbs 31 Husband" pushes into the ludic primarily through his farcical use of scripture; he employs the Bible to justify drinking beer. This is a significant challenge to conventional practice since the Bible is the foundational text of Christianity and is considered by evangelicals in its entirety to be the Word of God; trifling with it to justify a beer buzz is surely cheeky, if not heretical. However, the husband is indulgent but not alcoholic, willful with his wife but not belligerent. He is resistant to her encouragement to become an engaged Christian, but by bothering to cite scripture he notably works within the terms of Christian culture rather than rejecting it outright. He makes the effort to respect his wife's construct of virtue rather than disregard it. Crucially, there is no suggestion whatsoever that Christianity is invalid or make-believe or without value, no challenge stated or implied regarding the validity of the faith, its essential theology, or the existence of God.

LarkNews.com

LarkNews.com is a pro-Christian website devoted to Christian humor. Styled as a news site with short pieces that resemble newspaper articles, it purports to be “A good source for Christian news!”. LarkNews features short articles²⁵ written in the satirical style familiar to readers of TheOnion. There is no trace of irony within the articles themselves, no acknowledgment by the author that the article is something less than genuine journalism reporting genuine news. The locations offered are real places, presumably to increase the sense of verisimilitude, and some articles even feature photographs. Recent pieces such as “Kidney donor cries foul when recipient ditches Christianity”, “Mega-church downsizes, cuts non-essential members”, and “Man starts church for jerks” are typical examples of the kind of “news” they send out to subscribers, are posted to their Facebook site and Twitter feed, or can be discovered by anyone who visits the website. It is a site for Christians, by Christians, at least partially supported by businesses catering to Christians, but entirely dedicated to making fun of Christianity. LarkNews gets some of its advertising revenue from concerns such as Dominican University, the Christian dating service ChristianMingle, ministry schools, and local churches. It is also an AdSense client, featuring a window in which tailored advertising appears according to the search trends of whomever has brought it up on their digital device²⁶.

²⁵ When I interviewed LarkNews founder Joel Kilpatrick, he alternately referred to his work as “articles” or “stories”.

²⁶ Predictably, when I’m on the site I get a lot of advertisements for college graduate programs, home improvement equipment, and Avon beauty products.

Joel Kilpatrick began LarkNews²⁷ in 2003 after being “bothered by the Holy Spirit” for two years to found a satirical website aimed at Christians. He was well suited to the task. Kilpatrick²⁸ has a M.A. in journalism from Columbia University’s School of Journalism and has worked as a free-lance reporter with work featured in *Time*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, CBS Radio, and the *Dallas Morning News* (LarkNews.com). Kilpatrick has also ghostwritten a number of texts, including Don Colbert’s bestselling book *Seven Pillars of Health* (2006).

The site went live on January 1, 2003 after Kilpatrick hired a web designer and put together a small team to help. Originally LarkNews had a paid staff of five and several unpaid contributors, but none are full time employees, including Kilpatrick. The site primarily satirizes the evangelical Christian community, but occasionally includes other denominational groups including Baptists and Catholics.

Comically Addressing the Sacred

The satire offered by LarkNews works both to entertain its readers and to provide an alternative, ludic mode for addressing issues related to Christian culture, theology, and practice. The selected articles in this section serve to demonstrate a range of ludic arguments and morality tales that can serve to both delight readers and to stimulate

²⁷ The founding story provided on the LarkNews website is a lot more fun, but completely made up. *LarkNews was founded in Denver, Colorado, in 1956 as the local church newsletter for Flatiron Community Church, but its breadth of stories stirred wider interest, and by 1963 LarkNews was being mailed to subscribers in 44 states and Canada. Since then the “little newsletter that could” has grown to 45,000 postal subscribers, and LarkNews.com now reaches potentially billions of computer-owners worldwide. LarkNews’ mission remains to publish cutting edge news on topics of interest to Christians. Our main offices are located in downtown Denver.* (Lark News.com)

²⁸ “Like most of you, I am in the fortunate position of not being a Bible scholar. Bible scholars have ugly wives and depressing, subterranean offices in little-known colleges somewhere in the Midwest. They are always thinking in three languages, which leaves little time for pretending to be human.” (Joel Kilpatrick, in *God That’s Funny* 2012).

consideration of how Christianity is practiced by Americans who may be similar in some respects to themselves.

“For VBS addicts, it’s a hard fall”

KETCHIKAN — Four months ago, Erica Janssen was the most vibrant eight-year-old on her block, hugging neighbors, singing while she rode her bike. Today, a weakened, pale Erica lays in her bed and won’t even speak, let alone attend school. Like a growing number of children, she became a VBS addict this summer after attending five separate VBS programs.

“We thought it would be special for her,” says Susan Janssen, her mother. “We put her in VBS’s at the Methodist and Baptist churches. She liked them so much, we kept finding other ones.”

But that led Erica on a downward spiral of dependence. When VBS season ended in August, Erica’s addiction took hold.

“For a child, the end of VBS season is like going cold turkey,” says Dr. Manuel Jalisco, who has studied the epidemic, and who is helping the Janssens with Erica. VBS addicts, he says, crave the frenzy of weeklong activity, the camaraderie, the silly songs, the instant friendships and the T-shirts. The combination is “a powerful tonic.”

“Too many churches amp up these kids with funny skits, competitions and sing-alongs. They may as well be selling crack on a streetcorner,” he says. “It’s that addictive.”

In the afternoon, Susan comes into Erica’s room. The girl wears a fire-truck red shirt that proclaims, “Kingdom Adventure Vacation Bible School.” It hasn’t been washed in three months because she won’t take it off.

“Erica, it’s bath time,” Susan says softly. Her daughter doesn’t move. “Erica, honey. Let’s have a bath.”

Erica sighs, rolls over and closes her eyes. She is rail-thin. Her father has force-fed her ramen soup the past four nights. Susan tries to lift her from her bed, but Erica thrashes and screams. Susan quickly calms her by putting on a VBS song CD. Erica lays back, inhales deeply and loses herself in the music.

“I guess she can go without a bath for tonight,” Susan says.

As VBS addiction becomes more common, parents are advised to limit their children’s participation to one or two programs per summer, which experts consider a safe dose. For the severely addicted, VBS Detoxification Centers have sprung up around the country. They function like Betty Ford Clinics for children, Jalisco says. As part of her recovery, Erica has begun writing poetry. Most poems talk about next summer, when she plans to attend six or seven VBS programs, including in the evening. Her parents haven’t yet told her that VBS is off-limits for the rest of her life.

“I’d sooner let her play with a loaded rifle,” says her father. “Once an addict, always an addict.”

The Janssens express hope, but later Susan breaks down under the pressure while folding clothes in the laundry room. “I didn’t know VBS could do this to someone,” she says. (LarkNews.com 338)

This LarkNews article takes its cues from alarmist stories about addiction, complete with detox centers to serve emaciated victims who are no longer capable of participating in functions beyond their self-destructive habit. It is absurd: vacation bible school has not caused a nationwide epidemic of young de-sensitized stimulus junkies strung out on silly songs about biblical characters. Surely parents who choose to use the summer break to reinforce religion in their children are not irresponsible enablers who have recklessly gotten their progeny hooked on something as dangerous as crack sold on a street corner. The article is thick with counter-ideological implication from both the essential premises (an church activity that damages children! the curriculum is bible-centered, yet you say it creates harm!), and the metaphors used (crack on a street corner, addiction, the need for detoxification treatment, a once thriving child now wasting away).

That such dire consequences could be the result of a Christian activity centered on Biblical teaching calls into question the validity and sacredness of both.

“VBS Addicts” hits plenty of notes that are antithetical to an ideal Christian lifestyle: addiction, crack, that vacation bible school is more dangerous than a loaded rifle. Most important is the essential premise that the young girl in question has become a psychological wreck after too much exposure to vacation bible school; she is withdrawn, emaciated, and antisocial because of what Christian people have done to her (gasp!). The article explicitly claims that this supposedly wholesome and Christianity-centric activity is suspect, and perhaps even dangerous. However, the piece never suggests that it was anything about Christianity, or its theology, or regarding God, that had anything to do with the child’s unfortunate condition; rather, it was the well-intentioned²⁹ activities at VBS and overexposure to them that caused the malaise. In addition, while the parents have become firmly disillusioned with VBS they have not reconsidered their allegiance to Christianity as a religion or a lifestyle guideline, and there is no suggestion that they blame God or have lost their faith.

By depicting the effect of vacation bible school on children in the most ridiculous way possible *reductio ad absurdum*, this article reifies it as a positive and desirable Christian practice in at least three ways. Most obviously it associates the pleasure of a humorous story with vacation bible school, creating a positive connection that may prime a reader to think positively of it when s/he considers it as an option for children. In the second place, it suggests that some parents are sending their kids to a LOT of vacation bible school! This might make parents (or grandparents, or pastors, etc.) wonder if they

²⁹ Well-intentioned: it’s not as if something sinister happened, e.g. that VBS was a cover for sexual abuse or some other heinous activity.

should make similar arrangements, lest the kids in their charge miss out on a potentially wholesome Bible-centered experience. Thirdly, the article is very explicit in telling the reader that vacation bible school is an incredibly wonderful experience, so much so that kids may want to go again and again and again. For an adult interested in rearing children to embrace Christian ideology and lifestyle choices, vacation bible school is presented as a powerful and attractive option. The frightening aspects of VBS are easily dismissed since they are obviously ridiculous. The notion of sending a child to vacation bible school has now been encouraged and reified, by way of a satirical news article that explicitly makes fun of the practice.

“Pastor Welcomes Birth of Second Sermon Illustration” (LarkNews.com 5350) is a good demonstration of how characters featured in *The Lark* are consistently portrayed as being in earnest. Complete with a photo of the beaming father holding his newborn, the article tells how this pastor’s delight at the birth of his child is completely centered on how she will be providing him with anecdotes to illustrate his Sunday sermons. She’s to be christened ‘Allie May’ because “it flows so well off the tongue”, and the process of her birth has already inspired a homily called “embracing new pathways”. An older daughter has already provided “great material”, such as the “powerful lesson for all of us” in her choosing rocky road ice cream over sherbet “because there’s more stuff in it”. Of course the pastor would seem to us misguided and in need of some kind of priority-setting intervention, since his children are not taken to be valuable in themselves but utilitarian generators of sermon illustrations. They are tools to be used for their father’s success at the pulpit and (absurdly) everything they do is potentially instructive, including ice cream selection and the lessons to be learned from climbing a tree for the

first time. However, there is no concession from within the story that the pastor is in the slightest bit a cynical parent. His joy and delight in how they can inspire him is genuine, as is his conviction that his daughters' experiences provide valuable teaching moments regarding God and leading a Christian life that he can in turn pass on to his congregation. From the perspective of the world reflected from within the story, the pastor's actions and attitudes make perfect sense; it is only from outside the story, from the vantage point of the reader, that the story comes off as absurd and the pastor's attitude somewhat inappropriate.

From the perspective of the world outside the story, however, the pastor seems like something of a vacuous twit for valuing his daughter relative to what she can do for his career rather than for her intrinsic value as a human being. As in all jokes made at the expense of church leaders the article is implicitly counter-heirarchical, challenging the notions that the pastor's skill at the pulpit is the result of anointed by God and that he is an enlightened family man providing an example of ideal fatherhood. The pastors in these kinds of bits are "dis-crowned", brought down to the level of the common believer and burdened by equal measures of foolishness and venality as anyone else. Their positions as men worthy to be leaders of the flock are questioned as their frailties are exposed and their elevated status is temporarily upended, but at the same time they are made to seem more approachable and relateable for having the same kind of flaws as their parishioners.

"Family Buys Hut Next to Sponsored Child" (LarkNews.com 5292) is a piece about a white American family from East Texas that has taken their charitable intentions to an extreme. Having bought a dilapidated shack in Honduras next to the family of a girl

to whom they had previously been sending care packages, they have terrified the neighborhood during their frequent visits by organizing events like “girl’s night out”, a men’s accountability group wherein the husband really wants the men to “get into each other’s lives”, and an effort to form a HOA³⁰. They follow young Carlita at school, send out scented invitations to parties, and generally display such an appalling lack of boundaries that the girl’s parents are considering moving to where the Nillsons will (hopefully) never find them. The missionary family is oblivious but absolutely sincere, and there is nothing remotely predatory or sexual about them (or exploitative, save for the fact that they are using the little girl and her community to feel good about themselves as generous Christian people).

The reality is that the Nillsons are a kind of Hallmark-card version of colonialist stalkers, displaying appalling cultural insensitivity and disrespect in addition to blatant disregard for context. An implicit cautionary message is hard to avoid: in trying to be generous the Nillsons have made themselves burdensome and unwelcome by importing their own culture into a Tegucigalpa shantytown in a way that in no way helps the local people, regardless of intention. However, this implied critique is for the Nillsons and by extension all Christians who confuse charity with American cultural colonialism, *not* for the Christian ideology that inspires them or the nature of the god whom they worship. It is individual Christians who look bad here, and the sometimes-misguided zeal of American missionary Christianity generally, but not the essential tenets of Christianity as a belief system or a mode of practical religious observance.

³⁰ HOA = Homeowners’ Association.

“Backward Masking Returns – As Marketing Gimmick” (LarkNews.com 509) has some sport with evangelicals³¹ by mocking their sensitivity to occult references and entreaties to sinfulness in popular culture. The gag is that backward masking, the practice of embedding recorded messages backwards into album tracks, has returned after being abandoned in the 80’s. Now, however, it is an intentional stunt to increase buzz for new records by inflaming evangelical backlash, complete with Geffen records funding an anti-masking crusader in order to make sure the word gets out and album sales are properly goosed. This article stirs up evangelical paranoia about the effects of popular culture on impressionable youth simply by bringing up backward masking, and stokes the fire further by claiming that Christian activists are unknowing dupes of the perfidious plot. It takes a shot at youth group meetings as well, claiming that sales spike on Mondays and Thursdays because the kids have been “warned” about these songs at their meetings the nights before. However, there is no suggestion that the occult content is “real” or has any genuine evil agency behind it; Ozzy Osbourne is even quoted as saying he “...put in a few devil lines, but felt silly about it”. There is no suggestion that the music does actual damage to religiosity or leads young listeners astray, and (curiously) there are no actual quotations of the supposed occult material. Even LarkNews will not publish “Satanic” messages, even to support a joke.

Among the more than 300 LarkNews articles I have analyzed, “Church Email Change Leads to Awkward Results” (LarkNews.com 4030) is the signal piece for

³¹ As written, the article directly targets evangelicals; however, they are not the only Christian group concerned about the practice of backwards masking. Anecdotally, I distinctly recall the nuns and teachers at my Catholic parochial school holding a workshop to reveal the practice of backward masking in music popular at the time (the mid 80’s), and my own teacher (a former nun herself) physically quaking with rage and disgust at the sacreligious nature of the messages being played.

marking how far The Lark is willing to go in the direction of vulgarity and body humor (which places it directly in context with Bakhtin's original formulation as informed by Rabelais). The IT director of a local church updates the staff's email system and assigns addresses by a simple formula: first name initial followed by family name. This causes some distress for John Erkman, whose new handle jerkman@hopefamilyind.net reminds him of high school locker room torments. The embarrassment is more acute for secretary Amy Nusbaum (anusbaum@...), and when pastor Paul Ennis (pennis@...) discovers his new online moniker he immediately insists that the system be altered to follow a last name.first name scheme. As far as *Going Far Enough*, the premise and email handles that result are the whole joke and add up to some mildly vulgar body humor. It's not sacrilege, but it does represent a transgression of boundaries, a transgression of the linguistic envelope that church communities consider normative. It's a little rude but the premise could be carried through to a lot ruder: there's no PHuckman, no DEamon, no RApiste. There's not even slang: we get PEnnis, not DICKes. The examples do not create words that denote violence, insult the Divine, or carry racist insult. When I spoke to author Joel Kilpatrick about this story and asked his feelings about vulgarity and body humor, he agreed that he could have gone a lot further but that he didn't feel it was necessary to complete the story, that he has no interest in being "unnecessarily offensive". However, he still laughs hard whenever he thinks about an earnest church staffer being called anus-balm.

"Dispensationalist Opponents Square Off For Friendly Game of Flag Football"
(LarkNews.com 208) is an article whose premise is a more direct example of inter-

denominational rivalry. It's the pre-tribulationists versus the post-tribulationists³², and the piece is written as if they are the reincarnation of The Sharks and The Jets from *West Side Story* (1957). The idea to hold the football match was inspired by "similar games between rival gangs which have reduced violence in major cities"; although in this case the antagonists had created most of the hostility by "railing against each other in academic journals", the story is written as if it were a nervous suspension of hostilities between rival gangs. A serious point of theological disagreement is reduced to a football match, undermining the significance of the debate and the arguments presented by each side, making a mockery both of the debate and the debaters and belittling the beliefs of both. The LarkNews story does not opine on which group is "right" or in any way suggest that either side is heretical (that might be Going Too Far), but the reader cannot help but note that the pre-tribs won the match.

The claims that some Christians make to being victims of religious persecution in the United States are fair game at LarkNews, although the following article could also be taken as a mockery of the efforts of alleged persecutors. "At Fla. High School, 'Cheese Tees' Skirt Religion Ban" (LarkNews.com 511) is the story of some students' response to a school policy that bans religious t-shirts as "potentially inflammatory in our diverse community". The scandalized kids ("It was like living in France or something!") print up t-shirts that sport a simple drawing of a cheese wheel and a few slices cut from it along

³² Based on the mid-19th century writings of John Nelson Darby, dispensationalism is an evangelical Biblical interpretation holding that God relates to humans according to a series of Biblical covenants that are distinct according to which "dispensation", or era, in which they were made. It is premillennialist, averring that Jesus will return to rule Earth from Jerusalem for a thousand years after a period of tribulation; the argument between the pre-tribulationists and the post-tribulationists is whether the rapture (a construct of Darby, wherein living true believers will be instantly whisked away to heaven at an appointed hour) will occur before or after the tribulation (Weremchuk 1993).

with the slogan “I Love Cheeses”; when spoken, the phrase is almost indistinguishable from “I Love Jesus”. Perhaps it’s just silly, perhaps it’s tacky and crass; representing the Godhead as a cheese wheel at least borders on the blasphemous. As with most Christian humor, carnivalesque or otherwise, how close it gets to Going Too Far is largely dependent on the sensibilities of the beholder.

Interpretation is key to the message in “Minn. Man Found To Be God’s Favorite” (LarkNews.com 781) as well, although it comes closest among LarkNews articles to making a comic foil of the Divine. According to the article, Bill Halberstam of Owatonna, Minnesota, is currently God’s favorite living person. If the article is to be believed, in every era there is a favorite person: before Bill it was a house pastor in China by the name of Lui Zhang, and prior to him an unnamed cleaning woman in Uruguay. One could take this to be a parable chiding those who believe they are holier-than-thou and particularly beloved of God. Alternatively, it could be seen as a critique of God as a sort of petty fellow who keeps favorites for no explicable reason. This indeterministic quality points up the difficulty in nailing down the limits of online Christian humor, and indeed of qualifying what might be carnivalesque, what is offensive and rude, or what is just silly and harmless.

Over the years LarkNews has posted a number of articles that riff on the role of a pastor’s wife, always with the assumption that a pastor is a man. “College Offers Degree in Pastor’s Wiving” (LarkNews.com 348) mocks both the expectation that every woman educated at a Christian university will eventually find herself a pastor’s wife, as well as the demands that her husband and his congregation will place upon her. These include how to smile demurely, “give a good word” about her husband, sing an impromptu solo,

and lead her inevitably catty and critical women's group in "clever seasonal crafts". One of The Lark's lengthier pieces, it relentlessly satirizes the role of a pastor's wife and really takes to task the evangelical church for stereotyping women into a "traditional" female gender role of unwavering support that leaves her without a shred of independent agency. Notably, the women in the story express no unhappiness about their role or destiny, only disappointment that (until now!) their education has not properly trained them for it. By going so far in mocking these practices, though, this article is both funny and a chiding morality parable that might intend to correct a regressive social norm. By straying into the absurd, audiences who are already involved in such a community seem more likely to react to the examples as extreme and unrealistic, rejecting the critique and observing that life for the pastor's wives they know is not nearly so oppressive and superficial. The stereotype of the "ideal helpmeet" is thereby reified by taking criticism of it to such an extreme that it cannot be accepted as genuine.

LarkNews seems quite aware of efforts to "win" in the contest for adherents that is the contemporary religious marketplace, and is more than happy to lampoon its excesses. "Skyboxes, Club Cards Woo 'Church Customers'" (LarkNews.com 382) supposes an 18,000-member megachurch that offers a tiered experience according to an individual's financial or service contribution. Identified by "Costco-like" membership cards, non-tithing members are forced to sit in hard stadium-style seats while regular tithers get padded reclining seats. Private skyboxes house groups who enjoy plush leather chairs and hors d'oeuvres, and only pay occasional attention to what takes place in the sanctuary. Members can earn "reward points" that add up to free hotel stays, tickets to NASCAR events, vacation packages, and the pastor admits that the church is competing

with professional sports for people's leisure time and dollars. The piece is funny, but it comes off as a bit harsh; it's only by limiting the gag to absurd extremes of elements already part of some churches' practices that it avoids Going Too Far. Within the gag, money-based social stratification is completely normative, and any sense of worship or sacramental observance is completely lost; the "sins" detailed in the piece result from what has been left out (sanctity, egalitarianism) rather than from introducing elements considered explicitly venal (e.g. a full-host bar, or perhaps strippers). The article uses satire to make a scathing critique of privilege and hierarchy, and further suggests that those sitting atop the congregational hierarchy are both least likely to appreciate the sacred and most likely to violate it.

Larking Carnavalesque

Certain examples of humor within LarkNews.com are examples of Bakhtin's carnivalesque strategy as it has been deployed by contemporary scholarship. These articles include elements of resistance to hierarchy, sacrilege, and transgression, but nevertheless can strengthen Christians' attitude to their faith (rather than weaken them) through consideration of the absurd degree to which those seemingly antithetical elements are taken.

By its very nature, any successful use of carnivalesque strategy must be composed so as to fall within two socially-determined limits; successful negotiation of these limits coupled with the effect of reifying the ideology underlying the butt of the joke is what divides carnivalesque humor from funny bits which provide some kind of helpful message in addition to a fleeting sense of mirth. The first restraint is what I call "Going Far Enough", meaning that the content must be edgy enough to be more than a simple

joke. There are no hard-and-fast rules determining what content “goes far enough” to qualify as carnivalesque and what content does not. It is a point of inflection that is constantly being negotiated among producers and consumers, and can only be defined to the degree that examples of its practice are described and qualified.

The second restraint is “Going Too Far”, i.e. pushing past the limits of what the audience will tolerate and simply causing offense. Rather than acting as a satirical spur to thoughtful reconsideration of its ideology that ultimately leads to reification, the material either causes the audience to become offended and angry at the content producer or become disillusioned with the ideology that was meant to be reified. Finding the limits of this second restraint through cataloging examples of practice is more difficult, since it is mainly by identifying what is absent, or could be included but is not, that one can hope to identify its edges. Nevertheless, insights about both restraints can be gleaned from careful examination of LarkNews’ content across a range of articles written over a span of thirteen years.

“Dancing Ban Lifted, Wheaton College Plunges Into Perdition” (LarkNews 2006) is an example of carnivalesque humor within LarkNews.com. After the school’s Statement of Responsibility is “watered down”, the students turn into party hounds bent on maximum indulgence in previously proscribed pleasures of the flesh. Out-of-wedlock pregnancy, theft, smoking, vulgarity, drunkenness, “dirty dancing” trance-music bacchanals, and falling grades become rampant.

The article contains nearly all the elements of carnivalesque religious humor. The students have abandoned the behavioral mores they had previously been following, based on the teachings of Christianity and one of its most visible colleges, and descended into

carnal behavior. Sex, drunkenness, and vulgarity are included elements in their hedonistic bacchanal, with no seeming regard for their religiously dictated beliefs. In the context of their residence at a Christian college this behavior is sacrilegious, profane in every sense. The students are defiant of hierarchy, heedless of the moral norms of their society, jubilant in celebration of the pleasures of corporeal existence. The young people are rude, and they are seemingly self-destructive. Taken altogether what they are doing is transgressive, a rejection of what they have been conditioned to accept and obey (and uphold) as proper Christian behavior.

Evidently the only thing standing between these young Christians and lascivious vice is a strict Code. A (presumed) lifetime of religion indoctrination has had little effect, evidently, since loosed from just one of the school's rules these kids have descended into carnality (and are no better behaved than young people at secular institutions).

Just as in Bakhtin's treatment of carnival, however, for audiences of LarkNews the result of witnessing all this bedlam is a re-commitment to the principles that are being transgressed. Having seen what can happen (albeit in a fictionalized account removed from the witness's personal experience), the horror of what can happen when morality is loosened has the potential to strengthen their commitment to guarding and enforcing those principles.

There is little suggestion that the Christian religion or its accompanying moral code is in any way at fault for the troubles detailed in the article. Also, it shies away from going to the nth extreme: there is no rape or other violence, and it's not as if the kids start worshipping Satan. While the piece goes to considerable lengths to shock the reader by describing bedlam at a well-known Christian university, it pulls back from crossing a

self-defined limit beyond which it may lose credibility as a publication that ultimately supports Christian ideology in the United States.

The insistence of some Christian groups that culture and policy in the United States conform to their ideas of appropriate morality is taken to carnivalesque extreme in “In Face of Declining U.S. Morality, Christians Emigrate to Muslim Countries” (LarkNews 243). It is a radical proposition: evangelical Americans abandon their country to find refuge in nations whose dominant ideology is provided by a competing religion that many have extreme antipathy for. In a profound use of irony, the article points out that the nations who most effectively enforce conservative morality with strict social codes and laws are those where Islam, feared and opposed by much of the evangelical community, is dominant. It turns out that the theocracy that many Christians long for in their calls for all citizens to acknowledge that the United States is a “Christian nation” already exists, and (but for the inconvenience of it being Muslim!) those determined to live in a society whose rules are based on religious scripture need only emigrate. The message is clear: what theocratic moralists claim to yearn for is best provided by a religion and complementary political system that are both incompatible with the ideologies of American Christians. Be careful what you wish for.

The article is outright stating that Muslim clerics do a better job of maintaining morality than Christian church leaders, and therefore that Islam is better suited for constructing a sanctified society than is Christianity. Certainly it’s funny, but the implication is brutal: Christians are conceding that Islam has won the moral high ground. It is carnivalesque “upending” on an enormous scale, calling into question not only the

societal value of Christianity as a force for good but also its claim to be the “one, true” religion.

“In the Face of Declining Morality...” is sacrilegious on its face for suggesting that Islam better provides for a Christian society than Christianity does, and anti-hierarchical at the same time and for the same reason. It such it is by nature transgressive, violating Christianity’s claim to a preeminent position of truth and righteousness. It carnivalizes Christian morality and yearning for God’s “Kingdom on Earth” by positing that they exist under an alternative religion located in unfamiliar countries, both of which are taken by many American Christians to embody the very opposite of their most closely cherished beliefs.

Much of the humor featured on LarkNews will only be appreciated by readers who are personally familiar with the rituals, motifs, and cultural habits of a particular denomination or strain of Christianity. A lot of this material is only potentially offensive, and therefore potentially amusing and engaging, to “insiders”; you may not get it if you’re not in it. Usually that means evangelicalism³³, though sometimes Lark will use another denomination as its foil.

“As Catholic Numbers Decline, Old Church Tries New Tricks” (LarkNews.com 415) supposes a Catholic outreach truck (the CC-Mobile!) roaming Mexico City to bring confession and communion to those who have trouble making it into their local church for services. The piece never goes so far as to outright state that Catholicism is outdated,

³³ Evangelicals do have a loose association under the National Evangelical Association, but in practice is a barely allied “denomination” primarily made up of independent congregations with little formal attachment to other churches; however, churches that include themselves in larger organizations (most commonly the Southern Baptist Convention) can also self-identify as evangelical. Regardless, there are enough commonalities of philosophy and practice that members of one evangelical church will recognize another as kindred by their activities and beliefs.

tragic, colonialist, and perverted, but it comes close; for Lark, it seems that humorous critique wins out over ecumenism³⁴. The CC-trucks are inspired by Catholics' "insane jealousy of Pentecostals" and the latter's success in Latin America, and feature brightly colored communion wafers and "Kickin' it Confessionals" where the faithful are encouraged to think of the sacrament of confession as "hang-out sessions with priests where you can talk about anything that's on your mind except subjects relating to child abuse". In addition, a priest from Oaxaca is quoted as being "...excited about the potential of our 78-year-old German conservative pope to dazzle people with his proven 'rock star quality'" and that "He [Pope Benedict XVI] will help us take back ground we conquered five hundred years ago."

Communion and confession are two of the seven "sacraments" in the Catholic liturgy, and the communion wafers (Catholics actually call them "hosts"), once blessed during Mass, are held to not just represent but to actually *be* the Body of Christ by way of the miracle of transubstantiation. The notion of multi-colored hosts passed out from roving panel vans is certainly sacreligious; to cheapen the rite by replacing the sanctuary with a repurposed ice-cream truck, and tart up the hosts as if so many bits of candy, is quite literally a denigration of the sacred in line both with Bakhtin's original formulation of the carnivalesque and the contemporary applications of that theory. It is counter-hierarchical both for how it mocks the sanctity and position of the Pope and for claiming that the "space" provided by a van is as sacred as that of the church sanctuary. Both the leadership and the geography of the church are transgressed in favor of profane marketing that cancels out the authorized practices of Catholicism.

³⁴ Ecumenism is a movement within Christianity writ-large that calls for greater unity, cooperation, and amity among all Christian denominations including Pentecostal, Evangelical, Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox varieties.

Some of The Lark's stories handle Christians more roughly than others. One of the sharper pieces is "Hoping To Speed Second Coming, Some Christians Invest in 'Anti-Christ' Companies" (LarkNews 515), which reports that some Christians are putting their money into companies they suspect of evil enterprise³⁵. Believing that society must get worse before it gets better (please see footnote 36 concerning dispensationalism), they gleefully put their savings into companies whose "products are likely to foster conditions consistent with the Last Days, as described in the Bible". One mutual fund company has created Last Days Funds (LDFs) expressly for this purpose, and even non-Christians are hedging their bets; as one savvy investor remarks: "...if the End Times happen like these people believe, I want to be wealthy enough to hide out in the Bahamas." It's not hard to appreciate how this article fulfills the requirement to Go Far Enough: it argues that Christians are more than happy to abet evil in order to bring about prophecy (and, by inference, that they believe God so hidebound and manipulable that the scheme will surely work).

The sacrilegious element in the piece is obvious: these people are abetting (what they believe to be) evil, violating the moral precepts of their chosen religion. Their treatment of hierarchy also works as sacrilege, by using officially sanctioned scripture to justify evil activities and (by inference) manipulating God to their own ends. Still, these twin accusations of blasphemous action/thinking do not indict Christianity as a whole,

³⁵ A secondary line of comedy in this piece makes fun of what millennialists (supposedly) consider to be evil companies: bio-metrics outfits that makes scanners for fingerprints and eyes, or even micro-chip implants; firms that make GPS tracking devices; international banks. Perhaps LarkNews suspects that these investors are looking forward to the rapture out of a sense of paranoid libertarianism?

but rather only those misguided individuals who fail to carry their Christian principles forward into how they do business.

Limits in The Lark

A consistent aspect of LarkNews articles is that they betray no insincerity from the text. There are no markers communicating a “tongue-in-cheek” sensibility from the author to the reader, nothing to suggest that the “journalist” is rolling his eyes at the absurd scenarios he has to report. Although the Proverbs 31 Husband might be an exception, the characters within the stories are also consistently in earnest, going about their business as if there is nothing strange or comedic about them or what they do. They are not winking at those around them as if to say “yes, I know this is over-the-top”; within their world, what they do or say makes complete sense and they sincerely believe they are living their lives in ways consistent with the teachings of Christ as distilled through two millennia of church tradition.

Based on this textual analysis, the most essential rule for The Lark in the way of “Not Going Too Far” is that the most essential elements of Christianity as a belief system are never to be challenged. Not its essential theology, nor the historical significance of the New Testament story of Jesus, nor the existence of the Divine as “He” is imagined to exist within the Christian context, is ever questioned. Rather the comedic treatment and its implied critique is reserved for Christian practice, for the contingencies of churches and pastors and individual believers, for the intersections where faith in the supernatural meets the exigencies of daily life and where good intentions mix with venality to result in the ridiculous.

The Lark never mocks God explicitly, and even the rare (and roundabout) implicit criticism says more about the foolishness of believers than it implicates God for being foolish Himself. The closest LarkNews comes to making God the butt of the joke is in the piece about Bill Halberstam (LarkNews.com 781) being His favorite person; for this story to be believable, God would have to 1) be open to favoritism, which seems at odds with the Christian dogma holding God to be universal and omni-benevolent, and 2) God would have had to share that He has a favorite, which (given the rarity of pronouncements from on high) seems rather more petty than is consistent with the Christian conception of God as a mighty and dignified Being whose every word is precious and powerful. Few thoughtful Christians would buy into either of these premises, so the joke is once again on God's people rather than God: "Here's a silly story to remind you that God does not play favorites and He loves everyone equally; if you had been thinking otherwise, get your head straight!". Even this story, one that just barely starts to make fun of God, is a carnivalesque rejoinder to remember a vital point of dogma: It's not God who is imperfect, it is us.

The first LarkNews rule in the way of Going Far Enough is to consistently challenge any notion that Christians are any "better" than anyone else, and to instead explicitly argue that these people are just as venal and silly and flawed as non-Christians. They make selfish decisions, they harbor misguided attitudes, and they are just as bitter about their jobs as anyone else. Surely everyone at one time or another wants to make the people s/he works with somebody else's problem ("Pastor eBay's Congregation" [LarkNews.com 748]), and a pastor is no exception. Young people everywhere look forward to becoming sexually active, and the Christians no less so (e.g. "Teen Hopes to

Have Sex Before Rapture” [LarkNews.com 165], and “Teen Seeks Missions Assignment Where Women Don’t Wear Clothes” [LarkNews.com 237]). Claiming a moral code does not insulate people from immoral acts (“Hoping To Speed Second Coming, Some Christians Invest in ‘Anti-Christ’ Companies” [LarkNews 515]), and at some point we all disappoint somebody (“Church Stuck With CDs After Worship Leader’s Moral Failure” [LarkNews.com 450]). The Lark’s “go to” strategy for poking fun is to tell Christians that they are sinners, that they are ridiculous, and (therefore) that they are funny.

Vulgarity and body-humor are rare aspects of The Lark’s repertoire, and mild when they are used. By their own example it is ok to refer to private areas of the body as long as the proper words (rather than slang) are used, but their sexual functions are never detailed and Lark never references waste or emissions. Name-calling is not completely out of bounds but it is of pre-adolescent caliber (“Hey, Jerkman!” [LarkNews 4030]). “Swear-words” are never used in LarkNews articles; one will not read any language in The Lark that cannot be heard in church or broadcast television. Aggression (as in the case of inter-denominational rivalry, or of church women towards the pastor’s wife) are acceptable, but I only found one article that alluded to actual violence (“Southern Baptists Launch Pre-Emptive Strikes Against Assemblies of God” [LarkNews.com 368]); if indeed one exception serves to prove a rule, violence is something LarkNews has decided should not be part of its ludic arsenal.

Inter-denominational rivalry is definitely within the LarkNews repertoire, and to varying critical degrees. The article mentioned above (LarkNews.com 368) reports extreme military-style violence that suggests a rocket or artillery attack, complete with wounded survivors wandering around the smoking ruins of their destroyed church; the

strike was motivated because the Assemblies of God congregation had been poaching members from the Baptist congregation. Obviously it's over-the-top, but it does reflect some of the tensions that exist within the religious marketplace. Catholics are rarely mentioned by The Lark, but as in the bit about the CC-Mobile detailed previously (LarkNews.com 415) are treated a little less gently; I don't know if this is genuine antipathy³⁶ or simply a symptom of reduced familiarity with what sub-topics offend members of a non-evangelical faith and to what degree they offend. By comparing opposing theological camps to rival gangs, Lark's treatment of the dispensationalist flag-football match also makes something of a mockery of the differences between pre- and post-tribulationists.

Race is a "fair-game" topic at LarkNews, but the joke is always at the expense of whites and usually suggests that Christianity has work to do when it comes to integration. One article reports that "The SBC [Southern Baptist Convention] hopes to attract more smiling, overweight Caucasian families" (LarkNews 368) (notice the bonus shot at fat people, also acceptable [though rare] LarkNews targets). "Suburban Church Celebrates Minute Level of Diversity" (LarkNews.com 334) makes great fun of a church that feels hep ("Racial mixing is very trendy...") because they have allowed their Filipino janitor and his family to attend service. "Hispanic Congregation Outgrows White Congregation, Muscles Into Sunday Morning Slot" (LarkNews.com 145) acknowledges the increasing power of American Latinos, who in this case have come to overwhelm their pale brethren in a Lutheran parish.

³⁶ But I doubt it's antipathy. LarkNews founder and primary writer Joel Kilpatrick's wife is Catholic.

LarkNews gets great comedic traction from taking some of the unique lifestyle and worship activities of (mostly evangelical) Christians and poking fun at their dangerous “potential”. Such is the case with the article about the poor child damaged by too much vacation bible school (LarkNews.com 338), and the bit about the pastor who sees his children as providers of sermon illustrations through activities like choosing ice-cream (LarkNews.com 5350). “Worship Banners Classified as Weapons” (LarkNews.com 390) quotes a legislator worried someone will lose an eye from over-ecstatic waving of signs in church, and another piece cautions against posting tales of sin on Facebook lest the pastor secretly trolls your page and decides to make an example of you at Sunday service (“Facebook Gives Pastor ‘Prophetic Edge’” [LarkNews.com 804]).

God, That’s Funny

The total absence of humor in the Bible is one of the most singular things in all of literature. -Alfred North Whitehead

I started this Introduction with a quote about the “total absence of humor in the Bible” from a guy named Alfred North Whitehead. In the spirit of Dave “Steve” Barry let me ask, why should we believe anyone who was named after a zit? More seriously, how could this gasbag possibly be wronger? The Bible is full of humor. It’s even “chock” full. -Joel Kilpatrick

God, That’s Funny (2012) is LarkNews founder Joel Kilpatrick’s explanation of how he finds humor in the Bible, as from thence his arguments that God is a very funny character. Both premises are important towards understanding the ludic as it might be used to support Christianity; whether or not the Bible contains any humor, whether God employs the comedic, and whether observers/believers include comedy as one of God’s attributes contribute strongly to the validity of making fun of Christianity as a constructive part of religious practice. For Kilpatrick, these are central justifications for

publishing LarkNews. As such, his statements offer some insight into the thinking that backgrounds the site and that inform his decisions about its content.

For Kilpatrick it's not so much that he finds God or Christianity personally amusing or comedic (although he does), it's rather that he sincerely believes that God is intentionally funny and takes delight in using humor as He engages with creation. He came to this conclusion after taking a break from the Bible after a lifetime of study and realized that scripture was ruined when taken too seriously³⁷.

Kilpatrick believes that God is funny on purpose, that he often makes changes in our lives just to "mess with us". Moreover, from his study of scripture and history he has concluded that God's humor is inseparable from His character, and that the human race and all of creation are part of his gag reel. If we're not the audience, then we're the punchline or the set-up. The world as we know it is essentially a swirling cosmos of laugh lines which exist to give God kicks. Kilpatrick finds humor in virtually every part of the Bible, whether it's the futility of human effort or the mischief of God in orchestrating funny situations. For example, the Bible book of "Judges reminds me of *The Jerk* (1979);... both are essentially plotless and rambling, a series of sketches stitched together into a story. Both have a restless, blindfolded energy which arrives at no conclusion and is more than a little sad."

That LarkNews follows a satirical style and most of the time mocks people who could easily be Kilpatrick's church neighbors is no surprise considering his interpretation

³⁷ "I remember being suddenly astonished at how much of what Jesus said was funny, absurd, exaggerated, sly, subversive or openly hostile. At some point I concluded that he wisecracked his way through three years of ministry. He seemed always amused at his situation – amused to find himself in human form, amused at the fear of the people around him, amused at his own powers, upset and then amused at his own ultimate mission. Like the man who walks into a bar, Jesus is the God who walked into his own joke – the joke that is humanity. And like any comedian, he made sense of it with morbid mockery, scathing satire, and gentle playfulness."

of scripture, and neither is the underlying friendly tone The Lark connotes. He finds that mockery and even insults are part of God's languages in both the Old and New Testaments³⁸; God mocks his enemies, satirizes his friends and heaps elaborate insults on people of all kinds. "Anyone who thinks God is polite and well-mannered might want to check the transcript again. Thankfully, God's mockery has none of the hatred or insecurity of human comedians...". In Kilpatrick's view cynicism and anger have nothing to do with good satire or humor because they are the opposite of faith, hope, and love ("...which is a pretty bad triumvirate to be the opposite of").

Perhaps the most crucial turn that informs The Lark's effective navigation of the limits of thinking Christianity and humor together is its editor's willingness to aver an absolute devotion to Christianity and at the same time recognize that Christianity is, on the merits of its essential claims, silly. Joel Kilpatrick admits that he has been a committed Christian "since roughly the time I was potty trained" and he depends on his insider affiliation for both his material and his unique insights into the practice of evangelical Christianity; crucially, though, he is able to take up a perspective outside of that culture to appreciate the propositional absurdity of its most basic premises. Intellectually, he understands that belief is a comic position even as he swears his unwavering devotion to it³⁹.

³⁸ Kilpatrick writes that he used to think it was possible to joke about everything in the Bible except the crucifixion, but he has repealed that caveat. He now finds the whole thing funny: "The idea is that Jesus, the coolest guy in the universe, shows up to the human party and they promptly pounce on him and kill him is funny because it's exactly backwards. ... It's like Jesus says, "Hey, I love you." And we go, "Oh yeah? Well we hate you. Come over here so we can kill you. If the cross hadn't been God's idea, wouldn't it be considered blasphemous in the extreme? Are you serious? What is more wincingly absurd than God being killed by his own creatures? This is way beyond the edgiest comic you've ever seen. This pushes the joke about as far as it can go."

³⁹ "Faith is foolish. It's a joke because it requires us to disbelieve the five senses God gave us and believe in something invisible and unprovable. If it isn't funny that we believe some resurrected

The Lark is Love

To me, The Lark is a great job. I get to love everybody AND make fun of them!

– Joel Kilpatrick

LarkNews founder and sole feature-writer Joel Kilpatrick generously allowed me to interview him for nearly two hours, and was extremely helpful in crystallizing both his motivations in producing Christian satire and the contingencies that affect the content of his stories. The deductions I had made from studying his material were confirmed for the most part, but also enlarged. His has more “rules” for what needs both to go into The Lark and what needs to stay out than I had confidently identified. It is also clear that his own sense of what his mission is in writing LarkNews has evolved from a simple calling into a genuine sense that he is ministering to his fellow Christians in an important and vital way. The primary take-away from his remarks is disarmingly simple, however: when he sits down to write he proceeds first and foremost from a place of genuine affection for his audience and the Christian community, and his primary measure of whether a story is both sufficient and appropriate is whether or not he can sit back and honestly say that he loves the characters he has created.

Kilpatrick told me that he felt led by the Holy Spirit to start a satirical Christian website for nearly two years. Initially he thought to critique secular culture from a Christian point of view, feeling that humor would be an effective way to address secular criticisms of Christianity that are otherwise difficult to answer. Further prayer convinced

human-deity still exists somewhere and one day we will go to a forever-place that’s better than Fairyland, I don’t know what is. Yet I do believe it. Laugh at me all you want. I am a fool for Christ. And if we are fools as followers, is he not the Chief Fool? And what does a fool do but make people laugh? Faith was designed to make us look ridiculous. God has played a joke on humanity and is seeing who is willing to look ridiculous with him.”

him, though, that “what the Lord wanted” was for him to start with the church. The idea did not sit easy with him.⁴⁰

He was further amazed to discover that almost nobody was doing Christian comedy in 2002. There were no Christian comedians to speak of, “save for maybe a few crowd-warmers attached to the Gaither band or whatever”, as well as Christian singers⁴¹ who would throw off a few one-liners during musical performances. He found no satirists, and nothing that would stand up against professional-caliber comedy. Finally he started searching the web for funny Christian websites that featured satire and might be pro-Christian, but he “...found a couple but I wouldn’t even call them funny. They were mean, angry, bitter, and... really profane sometimes. It looked like former Christians or something, just venting their spleen.” Kilpatrick determined that if his work was ever perceived as something like those bitter screeds, if it was ever “lumped in” with those “awful websites”, then he just wasn’t going to do this sort of work at all⁴². Still, he felt sure he would lose other opportunities for writing work and faced a real risk of being ostracized by the evangelical community⁴³.

A writer of Christian satire Kilpatrick has to strike a balance between writing material that makes enough fun of his audiences to engage them but that is not so sharp as to offend or make them feel attacked. Towards satisfying that requirement he has three

⁴⁰ “I was shocked, because it just hadn’t occurred to me to satirize my own community, [the community] that I knew well and had grown up in and still belong to, [i.e.] evangelical Christianity kind of broadly.”

⁴¹ Like his father, noted Christian singer / composer / producer Bob Kilpatrick.

⁴² “The very last thing I was going to do was open myself up to any accusation of hating this community or hating the Lord or being bitter; I just wasn’t going to do it.”

⁴³ After further prayer and consultation with his wife, Kilpatrick felt increasingly “settled that I could do something different, something new at the time.” When I spoke to him he was quick to correct himself and acknowledge that “nothing is every really new”, that he is reviving a tradition of comic engagement with faith and with God that extends back through the Holy Fool tradition to be found in nearly every book of the Bible.

firm rules, although he admits that he has occasionally bent two of those rules for good and for ill. His first rule is indeed the one I identified from analyzing the LarkNews website: Kilpatrick never challenges whether or not Christianity is “the true religion”, never questions the Christian conviction that God exists and is an omnipotent and omnibenevolent entity who loves humanity and whose works are ultimately for their betterment, and never expresses doubt that Christ was God incarnate as man. It’s not a rule he has to work at hewing close to because it’s part of his foundational assumptions about who he is, the religious ideology The Lark ultimately serves, and the nature of the universe⁴⁴.

The rule that most actively influences Kilpatrick as he writes, that most “helps [him] to walk that line”, is disarmingly simple (he describes it as “kinda corny”): the story is going to be ok “...if I love the people, if I love everybody in the story, all the people I made up.” He feels that if he can sit back and honestly say that his feeling for all his characters is love, then the story will come across to his audience as something that is good for them, as well. On the Go Far Enough end of the spectrum, Kilpatrick believes that his love standard “breathes life into the story, makes it funnier”, and assures that the story will have whatever elusive quality that has the “power to change hearts”. Part of this rule is taking care that he is not using his satire to express frustration or anger⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ “I believe in that world, I function in that world, and I don’t question whether it’s true.”

⁴⁵ “I don’t hate people at all, I don’t walk around with that inside of me, but... if I have strong, if I have basically anger in my heart about the subject then I’ve really got to be careful and I either don’t write the article, and I resolve that [anger] first, or I have I just have I keep a real close eye on balancing it. There have been a couple stories that got through that I look back on and I go, ooh, I was really upset at that group, or it just wasn’t funny enough. That it was just not... quite there, that it maybe came across as just sounding mean. There’s a deftness, you know, that I try to achieve. The very last thing that I want is for any story to go out sounding angry, or mean.”

Kilpatrick is very clear that *The Lark* is completely personal for him, that it is both an expression of what he wants to see in the world and a reflection of who he genuinely is as a human being: how he treats the fictional people who appear in *LarkNews* stories mirrors how he treats real people, how he thinks, and how he processes the evangelical Christian world of which he is a committed part. He tries to avoid his stories coming off at all philosophical or academic⁴⁶. He runs all of his material by his wife first (“she’s free, and she’s local”), and if she thinks the piece is too harsh then he weighs that against how he reacts to it after setting the idea down for a few days. In the end, he “... just has to go with what he thinks is best.”

The third rule Kilpatrick has is that he doesn’t make fun of people who really exist, a rule he has developed through experience. For the first part, he finds that people just don’t read those stories, that he’s just not able as a writer to make those kinds of stories work, and so he’s concluded that sort of thing is “just outside of the zone that God has given me⁴⁷.” For the second part, refer back to rule number two: Kilpatrick just has no interest in making direct fun of people if there is any chance he is going to come off as mean-spirited or bitter.

My survey of *The Lark* has revealed a glaring exception to rule number three, namely Pastor Rick Warren⁴⁸ of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. *LarkNews* has published a number of stories that feature Rick Warren, including “40

⁴⁶ “If it starts to get didactic at all, then I just correct myself by making another penis joke or something.”

⁴⁷ “That’s really been liberating for me, actually.”

⁴⁸ In the interview Joel Kilpatrick made sure to tell me that he and Rick Warren are by no means “buddy-buddy”, but recounted a story that is also told in *God, That’s Funny* (2012). Warren asked Kilpatrick to write some jokes for the pastor to tell when he was to appear on “The Colbert Report”, and Kilpatrick complied; Colbert engaged Warren in a serious discussion of religion, however, and Warren never had the chance to use the material.

Days of Purpose Draws Dead-Head Style Following” (LarkNews.com 409), and “Warren to Buy Saints, Build Purpose-Driven Field” (LarkNews.com 499). As Kilpatrick explained it, this exception in some sense proves his rule; he feels the reason he can get away with writing stories that include Rick Warren is that he is not particularly controversial. While he feels that Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyers and all other popular, wealthy popular evangelists are “valid members of the body of Christ”, he is concerned that many of them are lightning rods for controversy. With Warren, nobody is likely to read the story and imagine that Kilpatrick is upset with him or has taken a side in some kind of argument. With many other figures in the evangelical community, it’s more likely that someone’s going to either imagine that Kilpatrick has an axe to grind, or conversely has whitewashed over something the reader finds heinous about that person⁴⁹.

Kilpatrick does not believe that violence is funny, and the only way he’ll use it in *The Lark* is when it’s rendered in an absolutely preposterous way as in “Southern Baptists Launch Pre-Emptive Strikes Against Assemblies of God” (LarkNews.com 368). He admits that, regardless of the absurdity of that story’s premise, he did get some negative feedback over it, that it was too violent and the images it conjured were too graphic. He disagrees now as he disagrees then⁵⁰, and denies that the feedback has had any effect on his decision-making regarding limits to what his audience will tolerate⁵¹.

On some stories Kilpatrick has chosen to “dial back” a story’s content. An example he offers is an early story, “Wal-Mart rejects ‘Racy’ Worship CD”

⁴⁹ “When someone’s a lightning rod, it’s really difficult to mine any humor out of that situation. There has to be a sense of relaxation when people think about your subject. Humor really works best when you’re in a relaxed state of mind, when people aren’t thinking with two minds about whether the writer has an agenda.”

⁵⁰ “It’s not as if I write about how the blood dripped from the corpse of the child as they brought him to the ambulance or something.”

⁵¹ “My thought was, come on! Lighten up. It’s satire...”

(LarkNews.com 55), which premises a worship music album whose songs “depicting the church’s love affair with Christ” have gotten a bit out of hand. Examples of song titles featured are “My Lover, My God” and “I’ll Do Anything You Want”, but Kilpatrick told me that his experiments with double-entendre yielded other titles that he (and his wife) thought were more than the audience needed or would appreciate. He wants people who read The Lark “...to feel like they are being cared for, that their sensibilities are being cared for, and that I’m being a responsible person in a public setting.”

In an interview published in *Christianity Today* shortly after the site’s launch, Kilpatrick explained that LarkNews is an independent entity with no specific denominational affiliation⁵². The intended audience for The Lark is indeed the evangelical community that Kilpatrick grew up in and remains part of, but he reminded me that he has little control over who visits the site. He told me that sometimes the articles get reposted⁵³, sometimes years later, and until people realize it’s satire becomes fodder for people to make unkind remarks about “crazy Christians”. Such commentary doesn’t bother him; in fact he’s pleased that the material is not so “insider” that people outside of the Christian community cannot enjoy it and (perhaps) as a result have occasion to consider Christianity lightheartedly⁵⁴.

⁵² “We’re in the evangelical world but not of it. There’s knowledge, familiarity, and real love for our subculture, but there’s also a certain outsidership. We are not campaigning for a certain point or agenda. It’s like the relationship the moon has to the Earth. We can observe from afar, but we’re in the same orbit.” (Hertz 2003)

⁵³ Mr. Kilpatrick told me that this very thing happened early 2013, when a story in the Lark archive called “Couple Maintains Abstinence Through First Two Years of Marriage” somehow went viral enough to attract secular commentary from folks who thought it was a serious report.

⁵⁴ “I would prefer that no one were saying that Christians are crazy, that’s not the ideal response, but I still think something positive happens in these cases. I don’t know; at least they’re thinking about us, and at least they’re laughing!”

The Lark is not intended only for evangelicals, though most of its characters are drawn from that tradition since Kilpatrick is most familiar with it. He is very clear that he draws no value or validity distinction among Christians of disparate denominations and practices, and that he considers them all part of the same community⁵⁵.

Kilpatrick insists that The Lark not indulge in the sneering he sees at other religion-humor sites, but that it still maintain enough of an edge to leave Christians laughing at themselves, and nonbelievers laughing at Christians. The most frequent question he still gets is whether the site is for or against the Christian community. He testifies that it is decidedly “for” but must nevertheless maintain something of an edge to be worthwhile⁵⁶.

Kilpatrick has spent a lot of time thinking about how the satire he offers in The Lark can benefit Christians and Christianity, of the mechanism that somehow connects making fun of Christian people and practices with a strengthened confidence in precisely what has been laughed at. He explains it better than I can paraphrase:

Well, your best friends are the ones who can make fun of you and you still love ‘em, right? So we need that in our lives. I found, when I started [LarkNews in]

⁵⁵ “I very much love all the different sectors of the body of Christ. From the high church people in robes, and taking it all seriously and all that, cause there’s a season for that, a place for that, and that’s as valid to me as every other side, Osteen, or a small Pentecostal church where people do kind of weird things. Um, I just love it, I love the people, I think we all behave in crazy ways. I don’t think that I’m the medium point in the world, and that if you’re on either side of me you’re weird. Um, I just think we’re all kind of in it together. I think people respond in different ways when God touches their life, when they come to encounter and embrace with reality. I think some turn into Catholics, some turn into spiritual warfare Pentecostals, some are gonna, you know, it’s like a kaleidoscope or something. So I really do, I really do love all the people.”

⁵⁶ “I don’t think you can write good satire without loving the thing you’re satirizing. It doesn’t work when it’s mean-spirited or venting of personal opinions.” However, overly cautious satire doesn’t work either. “If your humor gets safe and flabby and sentimental, then your faith gets safe and flabby and sentimental,” he says. “Humor becomes a pinch of satire and a heaping helping of warm affirmation.” (LeBlanc 2008)

January 03, was that nobody was really doing that for Christians, specifically Evangelicals, nobody was making fun of them, nobody was loving them in that way. So there was a real lack, there was a real need for someone to [do that]. So how do you feel on a personal level when your friends make fun of you? You know yourself better, right? And you see part of you that you took seriously, but the people around you made you realize that you were taking that part too seriously. Or, I'm acting ridiculous in some way. So, humor: it's corrective, it's informative, it's fun, everyone likes to look in the mirror and see themselves. So I just think that The Lark does this for whoever reads it, the same thing that your best friend does. It liberates you really, it liberates you from how you see yourself, it sifts and refines your thoughts, and your beliefs. And you can come back and hold some of them more strongly afterwards, and some of them you let go. You realize that's silly, I'm not going to think that way anymore, not behave that way anymore.

Kilpatrick doesn't actively try to make anything happen, he doesn't craft or engineer the stories featured in The Lark so that they will have some kind of specific effect on readers or on congregations. He's experimented with insinuating an agenda, and he feels that it doesn't work, that the humor in the piece just doesn't measure up to his standards. Kilpatrick believes his task is to write funny stories, and to let God do what He will with the hearts of the people that read them.

Kilpatrick has said that early response to the material on the site revealed a wide spectrum of interpretation. He did take some flak in the site's early days, but it was far

outweighed by positive feedback; “almost nobody accused me of blasphemy⁵⁷.” Later feedback suggests that after a few years LarkNews had earned some acceptance within the evangelical community. Ron Poarch, the pastor of Grace Reformation Church in Woodland, CA, admitted that he was also tricked when he first encountered the site but quickly became a fan. Further, that he and a group of about eight church members regularly visit the site together at the end of their Bible study sessions and find that there is some truth to be found behind the punch lines. “It has fueled some conversations about what’s behind this, and it correlates with our evangelical culture. Joel has a real insight into the faddishness of the church” (LeBlanc 2008).

Some readers do not immediately understand that the site is satirical and mistake its content as genuine reportage. As it turns out Wal-Mart did not ban a racy worship album for “suggesting imagery depicting the church’s love affair with Christ”, but that did not stop a Wisconsin radio station from heavily discussing the nonexistent album on the air (they later issued a retraction). Big Idea Productions fielded numerous phone calls from pastors upset with comments that their animated character Bob the Tomato had supposedly made; in fact, “he” never bragged that VeggieTales is “bigger than Jesus” as LarkNews had reported. LarkNews also reported that prominent publisher Zondervan was about to come out with a special version Bible for homosexuals called the gNIV; a Zondervan Publishing House representative had to tell a reporter from *Christian*

⁵⁷ In those early days he shared these thoughts with a reporter: “On the negative side, you range from those who are rather vicious to those who say they're sad that someone would do this to those who think it's funny but not right. On the other hand, you have people who enjoy satire as an art form and they critique our stories on whether they are well done or not. Other readers tell me that this is the kind of thing that helps keep them in the ministry. It surprises me how many people in full-time ministry I hear from who say they needed a laugh.” (Hertz 2003)

Retailing that the story could have only come from a “sick and disturbed individual”⁵⁸ (LeBlanc 2008).

The negative commentary never bothered Kilpatrick because he was already convinced he was doing nothing wrong; indeed, he believed that he was doing the work that God had instructed him to. He was doing something new to most, that Christians were not used to being celebrated by being made fun of by one of their own, and that it wouldn't be long before “everyone would catch up”. He understood that the “Wal-Mart Refuses to Carry Worship CD” flap was largely because it contained more than a hint of the sexual, and Christians were accustomed to a reactive posture when it came to sexuality being broadcast via popular media channels. For those few who continue to be opposed to what he (and other Christian humorists) are doing, Kilpatrick has only pity⁵⁹.

Kilpatrick did not initially see his work with *The Lark* as a “ministry”, i.e. “carrying forth Christ's mission in the world” (Bowden 2005). He thought it was good for Christians, but he didn't see it as akin “...to laying hands on people through a website”. He calculated that there must be Christians who were like him, that appreciated the humorous aspects of faith and practice, and that they too would want to laugh at the things that surrounded their lives. He did not think in those first few years that he was ministering to believers, that they “needed” what he was offering. He was just trying to be funny.

Since then he has gotten messages from pastors telling him that *The Lark* had “saved their ministry”, that they were “dying inside” because they didn't know that there

⁵⁸ Joel Kilpatrick shared that the remark from Zondervan is especially delightful for him to remember now that he has become a Zondervan author with *The Art of Being You: How to Live as God's Masterpiece* (2010), co-written with his father Bob Kilpatrick.

⁵⁹ He “figures that people who can't see it are the same as folks who don't see humor in the world around them, and can only see angst and conflict.”

were other believers out there who also saw humor in Christianity, and he finds the idea startling⁶⁰. He reports that the most common feedback he gets is that people just never thought about it before, that *The Lark* has been a stepping-off point for their own exploration of whether and how to include humor in their approach to their faith.

In his book *God, That's Funny* Kilpatrick makes the argument that the majority of Christians do not include humor in their approach to the scriptures, to their faith, or to their relationship with God. They are not trained to as they are brought up in the faith or as they are brought into it as adults, and until recently few in contemporary Christianity were providing witness to this approach. But he believes the comedy of God is firmly within every Christian's experience, that whether or not they embrace God's humor and the humor within the practice of Christianity they nevertheless are familiar with it experientially.

The examples of these experiences that Kilpatrick offered might otherwise be characterized as situational irony, or what Kilpatrick refers to as "God messing with you". God is cheeky, says Kilpatrick, and uses His humor as a corrective device⁶¹. He testifies that this kind of thing happens all the time within his circle of friends, and that it's common for someone to remark that "God's got a real sense of humor", but that generally it's wasn't something talked about in a serious way until the recent flowering of Christian humor online.

Thence lies the disconnect: it seems that many Christians have a sense that there is a humorous element within the Christian project, within the ideal "relationship"

⁶⁰ "You know, I was very very surprised. I was like, you gotta be kidding me! Part of me was thinking this is just humor after all."

⁶¹ "You've signed up for a mission trip but really really hope you don't get assigned to Africa? You're going to Africa. You're peeved at yourself for letting your flowers die? Next time you log onto Facebook you're bound to find a beautiful picture of flowers posted by one of your friends."

between God and His people, but they only mention it to their closest friends (if at all). It's rarely brought up in church, or Christian music, or in small group Bible study. Kilpatrick wants his fellow Christians to know that it's ok to talk about it, and he wants everyone to know that humor is an important part of Christian observance⁶².

Part of Kilpatrick's mission is to make it clear to his audience that God is not random or capricious in what He does, that the circumstances of people's lives are not accidental. "God is messing with people on purpose, and just like your best friend only does it because he loves us. Or, why would He do it? There are things in life that can only be explained by God's sense of mischief, even things in the Bible."

The place of humor within the Christian conversation, within the practice of Christianity and the discussion of it among believers, continues to grow. This is The Lark's eleventh year, and according to Kilpatrick the site is more popular now in terms of traffic ("by all indicators actually") than it has ever been. In addition, Christian comedians are flourishing (see chapter four of this dissertation), which is really gratifying for Joel⁶³.

I agree with Kilpatrick that in the time The Lark has been publishing and Christian comedians have been proliferating, more and more Christians have come to

⁶² "You know what, it's ok to talk about it. And not just in whispered tones, like at a small group, but why don't we explore this together? You know, that's what I was really wanting the book to say, that instead of throwing up a door go ahead and say that you know that experience you've been having is, you know, God!, and there are a lot of people having that, and I think we should look into the Word and know Him at this level. I think He's inviting us to do that."

⁶³ "I'm hugely happy that there are so many [Christian] comedians now. First of all, I don't feel very lonely anymore, like I did at one time. Lonely in the professional sense, because when you do something new like this it's almost like the culture has a choice. Are we gonna go this way? Or are we gonna NOT go this way? You know? I know it wasn't The Lark as much as it was the Holy Spirit, kind of breathing on His followers to make them receptive to this humor, to make them grow up into this. I'm just very very gratified. I'll say this: whenever I meet a comedian, anyone who's in the humor biz who's Christian, and they go hey this is Joel, this is the guy who did The Lark. This is the first thing they say: Wal-Mart rejects racy worship CD! They just begin rattling off their favorite stories."

trust in humorous treatment of their faith and their practices. They increasingly think it's valid, that it's constructive, that it's innocent fun, and they have become accustomed to being made fun of with no consequential loss of sanctity. For him, this evolution represents something of a growth spurt for the church as a whole⁶⁴.

It is reasonable to read many, if not most or indeed all, of the articles posted on the LarkNews website as parables with specific (though never explicitly stated) moral messages. Parables are succinct stories that illustrate a principal or moral, and are a central device used by Jesus in the gospel stories. Perhaps the "Family Buys Hut Next to Sponsored Child" story is meant to caution would-be benefactors about the dangers of cultural insensitivity and de-facto imperialism that their efforts might amount to. Maybe "Dancing Ban Lifted, Wheaton College Plunges Into Perdition" serves as a warning to Christian leaders and Christian parents about the potential risks of loosening their standards and letting young people do as they will. Even "Suburban Church Celebrates Minute Level of Diversity" can be interpreted as an intentional jab at the fact that "Sunday morning is [still!] the most segregated hour of Christian America" as Dr. King described it back in 1968 (Blake 2010).

Kilpatrick insists that any moral rejoinders in his articles are accidental. In fact he told me that "he has no patience for that sort of thing", and that the last thing he wanted his readers to have to contend with is trying to determine if his stories hide any kind of

⁶⁴ "I think it's a huge leap in maturity to be able to laugh at yourself, not to be so much in earnest and serious all the time. Ah, I just feel like we've worked, we've worked out and built up and some good muscles in the body of Christ by communicating with each other in this way. It's a big deal. Every time a church has a comedian come in and does a good job, and is really funny without being mean, and he loves people and he's really really good, that is a.. such a life-giving thing, for those people and for their relationships with other people. Now it's not just we watch *The Simpsons*, or *30 Rock*, or whatever show, and we laugh with unbelievers. Now we're laughing with each other, and we're laughing at our own stuff, and I'm laughing at myself!"

agenda whatsoever. He does see that humor can be corrective, and in fact that's one of the benefits he thinks his work brings to the Christian community, but he insists it's an organic element that he makes no effort to weave into his writing. He concedes that he has a particular moral point of view, and that it undoubtedly comes out in his work ("How could it not?"), but expressing that view is not what he's after with *The Lark*⁶⁵.

Concerning parables, Kilpatrick told me that he thinks the reason we still talk about Jesus' parables in the gospels, the reason there's still debate about them, is that "they're not that easy to understand". In his view one of the best ways we gather wisdom is when not it's not laid out for us, when it's not "...like a Sunday school lesson or something. Stories are brilliant in that way, because we can build on them and still not know everything that's going on in them. If I stay faithful to my own internal guidance on these things then they'll say something to people that I might not even know."

As a writer Kilpatrick is more interested in what his characters would do in the situations in which he places them. In the case of "Family Buys Hut...", for example, he's drawn up these two American characters who are *really* committed to what they are doing. How would that commitment play out? What would be the likely reactions of the young Honduran girl, and her family? What goes wrong, and what goes right? He "...just get[s] a huge kick out of that world coming to life." He also tries to include at least one character who has a contrary view of the premises of the story, who provides some kind of balance to the assumptions built into the characters and the situation⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ "I never want it to be didactic, you understand? Not propagandistic. Because if it were it wouldn't be funny, it wouldn't be entertaining, it wouldn't touch hearts, it wouldn't come to life!"

⁶⁶ "In that way there's some kind of balance, and frankly people can trust in me that it's just not me trying to put my agenda into people's mouths, a one-sided kind of story. I find that very important. It fattens up the story and makes it a real place, a three-dimensional thing which is like the parables that Jesus told, where we feel like we could know some of these people. People are

According to Kilpatrick, the functional benefit for readers of Christian humor centers on humility⁶⁷. The carnivalesque is a great leveler that cuts everyone down to size equally and makes it clear to every believer, regardless of station, that we are all of the same stature before God. As the writer he himself is not unscathed by the exercise, as Christian humor is self-critical; as he says “When I’m done writing a story, all I can think of is that I am just as dumb as everyone else. Not dumb; just as human⁶⁸.”

What LarkNews does can be described as making fun of Christianity in order to reveal the joyfulness within it. Kilpatrick agrees that humor doesn’t always have to have a casualty, and it doesn’t have to come at a cost⁶⁹. Even though the joke is leveled at Christians and Christian culture, it can function to abet and enhance one’s beliefs.

Lark and Contemporary Religion

LarkNews is an example of how the practice of religion is changing in the digital age. Facilitated by the technical affordances that put publishing within the reach of so many more people than in pre-digital eras, laypeople are producing their own commentary on their religious traditions regardless of whether it is sanctioned by its

not uniform in what they think, and so for me that contrary perspective shows reality, it shows true conflict and tension where people believe different things.”

⁶⁷ Humility is an important virtue to Joel Kilpatrick. On the LarkNews website is a tab for “Lark Premium”. Click on it and be treated to this message: “There is no LarkPremium, you elitist. LarkNews is for all peoples. Stop trying to be better than everyone else. But if you want to pay \$1.2 million, we’ll set up your private LarkNews site, write original content just for you, and you can even tell your friends that you’re the owner. Think about it. Now go back to the main page.”

⁶⁸ “You turn it back on yourself, and it’s a lot easier to see yourself in a real way after having made fun of the powers that be or something. It is about embracing humility! We are all very silly, we all stink, we all do bad things.”

⁶⁹ “Yes! Listen: I don’t see this as propagandistic, even if it affirms the beliefs and the values of the culture that it’s coming from. American culture has great satire; if you’re agnostic or atheistic, there’s great satire. But I think any functioning community has to have this as part of the life of that community, as part of the life of the minds within its individuals. For any relationship to work, for any relationship to mature, I think there’s a level where you need to be made fun of. That’s why I’m very happy that it’s out in the open now, that we’re doing this together.”

clerics. LarkNews contributes to the richness of Christian (and particularly evangelical) discussion by giving voice to an alternative perspective on religious practices and church-influenced lifestyles. It also celebrates those practices and lifestyle choices, in backhanded but nevertheless genuine fashion, by showing how they can be both silly and at the same time normative, common, and relatable.

As a mediated point of religio/cultural expression, LarkNews reflects the dialogic nature of American Christianity by engaging in a discussion that flows from a congregational perspective back towards institutional agencies. In so doing it helps to *constitute* a particular flavor of American Christianity by actively contributing to how the faith is presented and interpreted, creating in part what Christianity *is* in the American cultural context and making it larger by expanding it into the sphere of the ludic. Through mediatization a satirical perspective becomes part of how readers can engage with spiritual practice and, via content such as is featured on LarkNews, how they can interpret its scriptural foundations.

LarkNews is a direct manifestation of the progressivist trend in contemporary Christianity for how it facilitates a two-way exchange between the mundane and the spiritual, between the effort to elevate the spiritual self and the comedy that results when those efforts come up against the realities of our mundane, imperfect corporeal existence. Certainly what LarkNews does would not be possible without the more liberal approach to belief that characterizes progressivism, a liberality The Lark⁷⁰ in turn advances and tacitly advocates by nature of its activities and participation in the American Christian discussion of what does or should constitute observant and thoughtful practice. In this

⁷⁰ Joel Kilpatrick, founder of LarkNews, typically refers to his creation as “The Lark”. In this dissertation I use “The Lark” and “LarkNews” interchangeably to refer to the satirical newspaper found on the internet at www.larknews.com.

LarkNews is part of the loosely affiliated progressive milieu, and contributes to the progressive imperative to tailor religion and spirituality to the tastes of our modern liberal society. It also helps to redefine what is blasphemous by admitting that comedy is an inherent aspect of Christianity as a practical human exercise, and then demonstrating that this ludic element poses no damaging insult to the faith but instead makes it more approachable and appreciable, and thence potentially a more durable part of individual and social life.

In the battle for loyalty and faithful adherence that is the contemporary religious marketplace, LarkNews renders evangelical Christianity more attractive to those who are interested in a brand of faith that incorporates the popular culture that makes up the corporeal world of ready experience. Often conflated with fundamentalist strains within the spectrum of interpretation that characterizes modern Christianity (fairly and unfairly, depending on the particular congregation/pastor in question), evangelicalism may seem remote from anything that can be construed as “fun”, much less funny. LarkNews remedies that condition by introducing seekers, and perhaps believers who are wavering in their loyalty, to a brand of evangelical engagement that is fresh, funny, and firmly in conversation with the day-to-day mundanities of American life.

Summary

LarkNews is a representative site of the use of humor deployed to support a specific entity: American evangelical Christianity. Its mode is satire, a relentless stream of humor that most readers likely will find funny. The butt of this comedy is primarily the people that it means to support, i.e. Christians in the United States, as well as the practices and particular culture of those same Christians. LarkNews reifies that which it

satirizes by communicating that the subjects of its humor are nevertheless beloved, that everyone involved are equally mockable, and that God himself is “in” on the jokes. In addition, LarkNews contributes to Christians’ further engagement with Christianity by providing an additional and (for many) new modality in the way of constructive and casualty-free comedy. In part due to the contributions of LarkNews, Christian humor has become an increasingly accepted and increasingly cherished part of the observance of Christianity in the United States.

The LarkNews strategies for successfully negotiating how to amuse with offending are largely born of the personal sensibilities of its only writer, Joel Kilpatrick, and can be described by a short list of rules. The overarching rule, almost a *raison d’etre*, is that The Lark will always support, without question, the essential premises of Christianity: that God exists, that Jesus is His son in a singular yet triune Godhead, that God is omnibenevolent, and that Christianity is the one valid and true religion. The first functional rule is that stories must be written from a position of love for the audience from which inspiration for the stories are drawn, i.e. Christians, and that all the characters in the stories must be equally beloved by the writer. The second functional rule is that no actual living persons appear in The Lark, in order to avoid the possibility of appearing mean or of having an agenda; the rare exception to this rule will never be someone who is at all controversial. Additional rules are: never write from a position of anger towards a person or topic; never publish an article that comes off as mean, or harsh; avoid being “unnecessarily offensive”; make sure that the material in The Lark reflects that its writer is a responsible part of the community he satirizes; make every effort to assure the audience that it is loved and cared for even as it is being made fun of.

LarkNews imperatives for making sure that stories Go Far Enough include, firstly and primarily, that the story must be funny. It should not be burdened by an intentional agenda, although many of the stories might suggest one. It should include at least one perspective that is contrary to the story's premise. The story has to point to situations and practices that the audience can identify with, but that are still absurd enough to be remote from their actual experience. The story must seem likely to elicit in its readers a feeling of humility, a sense of his/her own foolishness, and recognition that all Christians are equally odd and comical within their own denominations and communities. The premises of the stories themselves, as well as the situations faced by characters within the stories, typically employ some kind of sacreligious element that is rendered "ok" by way of the ludic nature of its presentation. Many of the stories, especially those dealing with pastors and other church leaders, challenge the validity of hierarchies and introduce novel, ludic approaches to understanding how Christianity can and should be observed/practiced by individuals.

The imperatives for what LarkNews avoids in order to not Go Too Far are largely constrained by the rules to avoid being mean, avoid offense, and to make sure the audience feels cared for. Specific examples derived from those are: no violence that is not so absurd that it cannot possibly be taken seriously; very mild vulgarity, without resorting to slang or crudity; no cursing; no leveling of direct insults to people real or imagined; nothing cruel; and nothing that would suggest that X denomination (actually, any religion) is somehow "wrong" or misguided.

LarkNews articles can very often be read as contemporary parables that contain an implicit corrective message, or gentle encouragement, to reconsider the morality or

appropriateness of certain behaviors. According to their author these are not an intentional element of the stories, which points to them being written in such a way that interpretation is a wide-open proposition very much at the discretion of the reader.

Some of the stories presented by LarkNews qualify as examples of the carnivalesque for how they incorporate counter-hierarchical, sacrilegious, and transgressive elements that pose direct challenge to essential tenets of Christian theology and/or culture. These stories nevertheless still serve to reify Christianity via a consideration of their absurdity that serves to remind readers of their essential beliefs and to reject the transgressive elements that have been presented.

Chapter Six: GodTube.com

The GodTube.com humor “channel” constitutes an online site of “church” in that God is worshipped through music and exhortation, theology and morality are debated, and a self-selecting congregation is given guidance on how to lead a Christian life. As at LarkNews, the ludic is presented as an alternative, productive mode through which to approach and examine Christianity and its various expressions.

If one were to only consider Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque as a “second space” where laughter provides a unique way to closely examine and interrogate an idea, GodTube would seem an apt example. As such, the carnivalesque is a useful frame from which to approach Christian comedy at GodTube, and helps to explain the appeal (in addition to its value as entertainment) of such humor to audiences that might otherwise be offended at ludic treatment of their faith.

However, it is difficult to claim that the humor GodTube hosts is truly carnivalesque. The videos it hosts offer no real sacrilege, challenge to hierarchy, or genuine transgression in the material presented. They do find comedy, and they do appreciate the cheeky nature of some of it, and for the most part they do see that the humor is meant as a compliment to Christian beliefs rather than a denigration of them. But without some form of religious transgression, it is a strain to call this humor carnivalesque.

However, based on their posted remarks, for some readers the ludic material on GodTube is absolutely sacrilegious, absolutely a challenge to hierarchy (primarily the preeminence of God), and is flagrantly, offensively transgressive. For these people there is no recognition that the humor is meant to be a compliment, a positive contribution to, a way of reifying Christianity. For them it is just blasphemy, and so has no redeeming quality that might lead to a strengthened relationship to their church and/or their faith.

In this chapter I identify, through textual analysis of both GodTube hosted humor and audience commentary, the various elements of the ludic that people can find both funny and offensive, constructive and poisonous, delightful and shameful. What works for some does not work for others, and examples that might seem similar can evoke startlingly different reactions. Again I try to identify the limits of Going Far Enough without Going Too Far, and bolster those findings via interviews with one of the content producers that contribute to the site. The data shows that merging the religious and the ludic is an enterprise that quickly elicits very strong feelings, and that while humor as a mode through which to constructively approach religion is increasingly embraced, it has a long way to go before being kindly accepted by everyone.

Thrift Shop – Christian Remix

*What what, what, what. What what, what, what.*⁷¹

I'm gonna go to church,

Only got 20 minutes till the service.

I saved a puppy, Gonna tithe my money,

I'm an awesome Christian.

Yo! Walk up the church and what Up it's me and H Diddy,

I'm so pumped up about Christ I brought a friend with me.

King James in my right hand, Testimony in my left,

This ain't no pocket Bible (Dang, it's bigger than the rest!).

Rollin' in Christian tee, headin' to the meet and greet,

Shakin' sweaty hands, please, re-sanitize me.

Smellin' so sweet, girls me side-hugging me,

Shoes be flyin' off, huh, I'm washing people's feet.

Woohhh... Man... But I'm a servant BABY!

Coppin' it washin' it 'bout to go and get some compliments,

Spiritual moccasins, Jesus' steps I be walkin' in.

I'll be your Boaz, and you'll be my Ruth,

I'm leadin' True Love Waits, I'm teaching it to youth.

I lead with Billy Graham style, lead with Billy Graham style,

Not for real, let's hang out, would you like to pray awhile?

Tailor made suit, lookin' nicer than the pastor,

Is this Revelation?, feelin' flyer than the rapture!

You didn't bring your Bible, you didn't bring your Bible?,

It's cool I brought 6 'cause I'm just that reliable.

Hello, hello, my pastor man my fellow,

Is that a Jonas brother? Uh... No.

Witness to some atheists, please convert those,

⁷¹ Lyrics of song “Thrift Shop – Christian Remix”, available from GodTube at <http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=0F0EJCNU>. Music sung to Macklemore and Ryan Lewis’ “Thrift Shop”, 2013 Grammy winner for Rap Song of the Year and Best Rap Performance.

Non-believers be like: Is that Tim Tebow?

Refrain 2x [*I'm gonna go to church.... I'm an awesome Christian*]

What do you know about rockin' Christ's forgiveness?

What do you know about wearing the bright gold tie clip?

I'm the pastor, I know how to lead the flock,

I'm like Tim Tebow, I'M A SPIRITUAL JOCK!

Thank your granddad for givin' his 10% tithe,

Cause right now I'm praying that, well, he's still alive.

I rock 40 minute sermons, no commercials,

I study every week, with no rehearsals.

I can marry, bury, dunk, and drop some serious religious funk,

I get the best parking spot in the land, #2 in command,

I'll pull you out of quicksand with my spiritual hand,

Cause under this steeple, I'm the man.

I saved like 5 dying puppies this week, I have a soft side,

You don't believe me, why don't you check out my cufflinks.

I don't auto-tune my sermons cause I'm already pitch-perfect,

Like John 3:16, I am worth it.

Servin' the Lord's supper call me Betty Crocker,

When you take the bread you'll be fallin' down at the altar.

I'm here, I'm here, with my arms wide open,

You're a sinkin' ship at sea and I'll embrace you like the ocean.

Check my notes, this ain't fire and brimstone,

But hey if Jesus ain't callin': turn off your cell phone.

Don't be a hypocrite, believe what you say,

Heaven's beatin' at your chest, like Dr. Dre.

Go to church next Sunday, don't give me an excuse,

To eat up your daily bread and drink your Jesus juice.

Refrain

I'm in a choir robe, I look incredible,

I'm in the second row, about to sing my third solo. [Repeat 1x]

Refrain.

These are the lyrics to “Thrift Shop – Christian Remix” (GodTube.com ofejcnu⁷²), an audio-visual performance to be found at GodTube.com. The performers are three young men⁷³ studying at The University of Mobile, and the work borrows from a popular song⁷⁴ and its accompanying music video (see footnote 43). The video is an example of the kind of content to be found at GodTube.com.

The performance is funny: three white men in a church, rapping about Jesus and Tim Tebow and how great one of them looks in a choir robe – it’s at least silly if not outright absurd. Taken as a whole the work projects irreverence by larking about with various motifs of Christian practice, such as foot washing, chaste dating, the work of pastors, and tithing. The way John 3:16⁷⁵ is deployed is a outright flippant, and the line about “Jesus juice⁷⁶” more so, and the repeated references to saving puppies has nothing to do with Christianity as far as I am aware; however, these elements come together to provide a video performance that makes entertaining comedy out of Christian themes and practices. The hand gestures and hip-hop dancing that go with the music help to complete the overall sense of irreverence..

⁷² In the interests of brevity and clarity, citations for content on GodTube are simplified to their essential elements; the full citation is always [www.godtube.com/watch/?v=\(nnnnnnnn\)](http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=(nnnnnnnn))

⁷³ Seth Brasher, Kory Van Matre, and Harrison Hughes, with technical help from a fourth student, Hunter Ballard.

⁷⁴ Christian remixes of popular songs are popular projects, though few appear on GodTube. A small sample from YouTube of the songs that have been redone and “Christianized”: Nicky Minaj’s “Super Bass”; Katie Perry’s “Fireworks”; Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies”; Carly Rae Jepsen’s “Call Me Maybe”; Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way”; Psy’s “Gangnam Style”.

⁷⁵ Typically regarded by Christians as the most essential passage in the Bible theologically: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (King James Version).

⁷⁶ “Jesus juice” is a slang term for the consecrated wine and water used in the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion that either *represents* (Protestant) or *is* (Catholic, by way of transubstantiation) the blood of Christ.

The piece includes nothing particularly critical of Christianity or Christians or Christian religious practice. It does not seem to do anything to mock or denigrate any of the touch-points that would be familiar to Christians who might see the video. It is raucous, but ultimately it seems celebratory as it highlights these Christian motifs in a lighthearted and joyous fashion. Additionally it could be read as a corrective message, as gentle criticism of those who imagine that participating in church, tithing, and looking the part⁷⁷ of a “good” Christian is sufficient observance of the religion even if genuine faith and humility before God is absent.

The 71 remarks posted by GodTube users who have seen the video and elected to comment include 58 who liked it, eleven who did not, and two who equivocate. Taken together they demonstrate that the “Thrift Shop – Christian Remix” video is interpreted by some as an insult to Christianity, by others as an inappropriate use of resources since it does not directly praise God, and by most others as a delightful comedy that offers a corrective message.

The very first comment is “Sorry, didn’t see this as giving Glory to God, it seemed more like making fun of Christianity”; the remark itself earned 33 “likes” and several “Amen!”. Another commenter added that she “would have enjoyed it more if it had been about Jesus’ awesomeness, how incredible he is, and what he has done for us.” One person took issue with the singer dropping Bibles, and another opined, “‘Gals be side-hugging me’ is not related to a ‘Christian Remix’”. The most perturbed reviewer declared the video a sign of the “End Times” and urged that viewers talk to God about the video and its makers.

⁷⁷ In this sense the remix would be somewhat consistent with the original it borrows from, which criticizes the ostentatious “bling” culture of many rappers by extolling the possibilities of coming up with great looks at thrift shops and secondhand stores.

These remarks suggest that a vocal minority of Christians do not accept humor as a valid part of religious observance or any conversation relating to Christianity. Some believe all demonstrations/pronouncement having anything to do with Christianity or God should serve only to praise or glorify God, that anything not extolling His sanctity and greatness is inappropriate. Others feel Christianity should never be the subject of humor, or insist on ideological / moral purity whenever God or His church are considered. Clearly, for many the video is an example of unacceptable blasphemy and/or outright sacrilege.

Many evaluations are positive: "I thought it was creative, entertaining, clean, positive, and fun.", and that the community should be able to take a joke: "Just because we're Christians doesn't mean we can't lighten up and have a sense of humor." One woman thinks it is exactly what kids are looking for and could get more of them to participate in church. These remarks suggest that the video makes a carnivalesque-type appeal: it successfully makes fun of Christianity in order to make it more appealing and recommit its adherents.

The majority of the positive comments (and majority of comments overall) speak to the effect that the video is a corrective message to Christians who go through the motions of being a follower but are missing the essential points of the faith. A representative example:

I respect your opinions about the video not seeming to honor or glorify God.

However it appears to me that the creators of the video had a different intent: To use comedy to help us realize how superficial and prideful it is for us to act "holier than thou" or try to EARN salvation by doing lots of "religious" things.

Once we realize how wrong this self-righteous attitude is, we will hopefully choose a RELATIONSHIP with the Lord over foolishly trying to become "holy" through the works that we do.

Of course meaning is always a negotiation between the producer and the text, and then the text and its reader, but in this case it seems that those who took the video to be mocking superficiality correctly perceived the meaning the producers were trying to convey. The above comment was followed by "Yes, that was our intent. Thank you" from Harrison Hughes, one of the four young men who made the video.

Because the video makes fun of that which it means to strengthen and reify an ideology (in this case Christianity) it is tempting to call it an example of carnivalesque humor. However, while acknowledging that some of the material could be considered sacrilege (tossing Bibles, referring to the consecrated drink as "Jesus juice", the flippant description of pastor's duties, the rapture remark, etc.), the video is not particularly transgressive. It is something ancillary that uses many of the same elements of the carnivalesque in a distinct mode by which to transmit its message. I identify this mode as the parabolic⁷⁸, i.e. a corrective or moral message that can act as a mechanism that bridges the comedy making fun of the subject and the reification of that subject that is ultimately effected.

GodTube.com

⁷⁸ Parabolic (adj.): expressed by or being a parable (Merriam-webster.com^c).

GodTube is a video hosting service whose look and feel closely follow the model of the much larger YouTube, featuring ten “channels”⁷⁹ including one for comedy. Their “about us” statement best explains what they are about:

GodTube.com is a video sharing platform offering online Christian videos with faith-based, family friendly content. Popular video sections on GodTube include; Christian bands and singers in Christian music videos, Christian comedians and comedy skits, spoofs and parodies in funny videos, cute videos featuring kids and animals, sports videos, Christian news videos and inspirational videos. Be inspired in your walk with Jesus Christ and grow in your knowledge of the Bible with videos highlighting inspirational messages and verses.

GodTube is one of several brands owned by Salem Web Network, including ChristianRadio.com and the news site ReligionToday.com; Salem claims to have more page views than any other brand in the Christian online market according to Nielsen Net Ratings. They are in the business of serving Christian consumers to advertisers; when I visit, I get adverts ranging from Christian Mingle to Toyota. The explanation⁸⁰ they offer on their website regarding their advertising policy is almost apologetic, suggesting that they are reluctant to be subjecting their users to advertising and to chance participating in such a worldly endeavor as commerce. Of course, they may have little choice if they are to remain a free service.

⁷⁹ The others are: Christian Videos, Music Videos, Artist Directory, Ministry Videos, Movies, Inspirational Videos, Cute Videos, Sermons, and Español.

⁸⁰ Advertising – and the associations we enter into with other organizations – is something we are constantly, prayerfully discussing and debating internally. Certainly, some decisions are easier than others.

This is the best we can do, we believe we do so in accordance with God’s will, and He has chosen to bless our efforts in His service. We will continue to do the best we can, while hopefully not becoming too much “of the world” in the process. (godtube.zendesk.com)

Like YouTube, GodTube allows its users to comment on individual videos hosted on its site. Members are encouraged to use their Facebook login, and can make either original remarks or chime in on a “thread” started by someone else. As a result, the comments sections also have the appearance of those on YouTube. While every video does not feature comments, those that do provide an opportunity to observe how GodTube content is interpreted by the (self-selected) Christian community that chooses to participate.

Although I did not have an opportunity to correspond with anyone at Salem about their standards of content, their terms-of-use statement⁸¹ reveals something about the

⁸¹ Selected portions of the Salem Web Network terms-of-use statement referenced in the above discussion (<http://www.godtube.com/terms-of-use.html>).

6. Any language, text, data, information, graphics or videos that could be considered vulgar, pornographic, obscene, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, hateful, unlawful; that are racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable... will not be promoted or transmitted via community areas.

a. It is expected that members can discuss topics without resorting to name calling or the use of such terminology.

b. Referring to particular vulgar terms or words in any manner that brings them to mind... is unacceptable.

7. You will not harass... or distress members... You will not engage in name-calling or personal attacks... You will not post inflammatory remarks simply for the purpose for evoking reaction or starting fights... (Often referred to as "trolling").

a. Attacking the character or motives of someone who differs with your view or denying that he or she is a Christian is unacceptable.

11. You will not... act in a manner that negatively affects others... perhaps especially in the defense of Christianity, in offering unwelcome spiritual counsel, or in debating doctrinal issues.

16. Discussion of sexual issues in any other than a serious... manner is prohibited.

17. You will not promote... non-community activities such as watching programs, reading books, or attending events, or by any other means, beliefs or teaching contrary to those of Christianity as articulated by the historic creeds, as understood by Evangelicalism, and as interpreted by Salem Web Network.

22. Salem Web Network reserves the right to determine what forms of Christian "ministry" can be safely practiced within the community and to prohibit at its sole discretion any form of ministry that it deems unsafe.

a. The practice of... otherwise biblical and legitimate supernatural spiritual gifts can be dangerous apart from supervision by duly appointed spiritual leaders such as pastors.

b. Salem Web Network prohibits the exercise of prophecy, dream interpretation, "words of knowledge," speaking in tongues and praying for or coaching others in the receipt of

nature of the kind of site they expect to host. Aside from the usual legal notices about copyright ownership, false representation of identity, and expectations concerning privacy are rules that are tailored to a site devoted to supporting Christian dialogue. They include proscriptions against acts that might harm or offend others, against vulgarity and rudeness, name-calling and the like, but also against promoting activities not in keeping with evangelical Christianity as interpreted by Salem Web Services, as well as any form of ministry that Salem does not feel deserving of the term. Prophecy, dream interpretation, and speaking in tongues are also not welcome on the GodTube site.

The rules that Salem has for GodTube both open and close the potential range of dialogue. Entreaties to respect others' opinions, to never question another's status as a Christian, and to do no harm in defending the faith or its doctrines suggest a liberal forum constituting a safe space for divergent points of view within an overall Christian tent conceived as both large and inclusive. On the other hand, forbidding anything related to speaking in tongues or the practice of "supernatural gifts" starts to shrink that tent back down. Forbidding anything that challenges "...Christianity as articulated by the historic creeds..." ("historic creeds" is undefined; perhaps Catholicism?) "...as understood by Evangelicalism..." (no, clearly not Catholicism) "...and as interpreted by the Salem Web Network..." (whose legitimacy as a theological or historical authority is never credentialed) is both confusing and potentially more restrictive still.

GodTube & Religious Media

speaking in tongues, and various forms of deliverance ministry within the online community.

In some sense what Salem News Network has done in creating GodTube is an example of “religion as media”, or perhaps more accurately of “media as religion”. Salem is a media company that purveys religion, specifically Christianity; it is not the media outreach branch of a religious organization such as a church or denominational headquarters. Rather, it is a corporate entity that uses media to create an independent site of religious expression. It allows visitors to express their faith through witnessing, posting, and commenting upon videos, as well as an opportunity to explore how and whether to expand their ideology and practice based upon the views and modalities that those videos present. At the same time, by presenting a particular set of constraints (standards of language and of metaphor, standards of civility in debate, and a notable ideological preference [i.e. evangelicalism]) it regulates the degree of latitude users must work within and establishes a normative “envelope” within which those views and modalities must conform. Thus, it effectively establishes itself as a site of Christian practice, and as a site helping to define Christianity as a religion in the contemporary moment.

Effectively GodTube has become something akin to “church”, where God is worshipped through speech and song and points of Christian ideology and theology are debated and disseminated; as such, it blurs the line between the sacred and the profane. In spite of their published concerns to the contrary, as a for-profit commercial enterprise GodTube is certainly a project “of the world” that gathers a particular demographic of users in order to serve them up to interested advertisers. By combining both sacred and profane (i.e. non-sacred) elements it is an example of one of the principles of progressive

spirituality, wherein religious practitioners are unafraid to use profane spaces and modalities in an effort to proselytize and further the concerns of the sacred.

“Thrift Shop – Christian Remix”, like much of the video content hosted on the GodTube site, is also an example of convergence culture. The producers appropriate a commercially produced music and video performance, substitute in their own lyrics and video footage, and create something new that expresses their own perspective. This perspective has little to do with that of the original (although both are satires of their respective communities), but nevertheless incorporates many of its elements, including translating its particular aesthetic, in order to frame its message.

Limits of GodTube

As explained in chapter four in regards to LarkNews, successful deployment of religious humor for a Christian audience requires three elements: humor; a sense that the humor is meant to contribute positively to Christian culture; and a text that stays within the twin limits of Going Far Enough and not Going Too Far. Where those limits fall is undefined and can only be determined as a negotiation between the producer and the consumer of the content, and for any particular site is best identified through careful analysis of the status of that negotiation. To that end, in this section I analyze a number of videos posted to the GodTube comedy channel as well as the comments on them left by those registered with the website.

Many of the videos on GodTube are snippets of performances by Christian comics, most of them excerpted from their own DVDs and posted by their own team. One of the most popular is Tim Hawkins, who started doing Christian stand-up comedy in 2002. His routines combine spoken word and singing (he accompanies himself on

guitar), and the majority of his subject matter comes from the Bible or Christian practice/culture. “Delilah” is an adaptation of the biblical story of Samson and Delilah⁸² (Judges 13-16), sung to the music of a contemporary pop song,⁸³ that seems to delight audiences simply by putting the story to music and narrating in the contemporary vernacular (GodTube.com wykzwwgnx). Another routine points up the absurdity of praying over food when we already know that what we’re going to eat is junk⁸⁴ (GodTube.com wykzw7nx). Both routines have elicited unanimously approving comments.

Reactions to Hawkins’ explanation for various types of hand raising during ecstatic worship (GotTube.com w7llkpnx) have not been unanimously positive, however. In the routine he demonstrates various ways to raise or wave one’s hands during a music liturgy according to one’s level of enthusiasm and personal comfort, and gives each of them clever but aptly descriptive names (e.g. “my fish was this big”; “dueling light bulbs”; “goalpost”; “washing the window”; “the Mufasa”). The negative comments range from the brief and condemnatory, “This is blasphemy! You will be judged!”, to a more fulsome opinion on why comedy relating to matters of Christianity is inappropriate: “Be serious my friend! We don’t need your ‘Comedy’ in Christianity. People are dying and

⁸² “*Hey there Delilah, this is your old boyfriend Samson. And I know that you thought lifting weights made me so buff and handsome, but you were wrong. It’s cuz I let my hair grow long, that makes me strong. Hey there Delilah, you came in when I was sleeping, and I couldn’t feel you cutting*” (and so on....)

⁸³ “Hey There Delilah” (2006), by the Plain White T’s.

⁸⁴ “*Sometimes we pray over food and ask God to make up for our bad choices. ‘Lord, bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies. Lord, please bless this bag of Cheetos, and this jumbo Dr. Pepper, Lord. Somehow make this nourish us in some way. I don’t know how you’re going to do it Father but we just trust in you now. Father, change the molecular structure of this food, this complete trash we’re about to shove in our gullet[s]. Change the Cheeto into a carrot stick on the way down! Spirit of low-carb rain down on me now! I pray a hedge of protection around my pancreas Lord. Right now! Intervene!!’*”

going to hell and you try to bring 'Comedy Central' into the pulpit! We don't need the world's entertainment... we need the Gospel!"⁸⁵. A (presumably) foreign correspondent attached her disapproval to the video's country of origin:

I can't understand why you Americans find this funny? The person is making fun of your worship to God and you are laughing? I am actually shocked that you even promote it in GodTube. I am not holier than thou... I hope you will ponder again why you are laughing with this man who is (indirectly) mocking your way in worshipping your God.

Positive replies far outweigh the negative however, 89 to eight (91%). Many remarks are to the effect that they person will have a hard time not laughing in memory of the bit next time s/he is waving hands during worship; others just express gratitude for a good laugh at the Christian community: "I love being in this big family of God with all kinds of brothers and sisters, some are just funny and make us laugh when times get tough. Of course I am serious about Jesus but sometimes a brother or sister can come along and help lighten the load and help us to laugh at and lighten up on ourselves." Lengthier remarks are exclusively in response to those who were scandalized, and the following is a typical example:

Dude, the only one to ever live a holy life is Jesus Christ. PERIOD. All have sinned and fall short, he was not preaching a sermon, he was doing stand up comedy. If u do not like it, why then did you watch it? Tim is one of what I call A light in a dark place. The world of 'Stand -up Comedy' is full of all kinds of sick things. The language is sickening, the 'topics' many Comedians use are

⁸⁵ Since GodTube separates comedy videos into a distinct and well-marked channel of its own, one wonders why this commenter watched the video in the first place.

completely opposed to what Gods' Word says is edifying or life bringing. He is better than those guys/gals, and it's 'OKAY' for a believer to laugh! It's even OKAY to PAY, to go see a show, and spend some time with God, being entertained by TIM HAWKINS! He has a gift, and he is using it for Gods' Glory, when he could be making MILLIONS of dollars out there in the clubs, and arenas across this globe. Praise God for Tim, and his ministry. YES I said MINISTRY... several people I have gotten to know were intrigued by this Man of God, not realizing that a Believer is allowed to have FUN. You may not 'see it as funny', but God Does!

These remarks reveal a lively debate among Christians about the appropriateness of humor when it is applied to matters of “church”, writ broadly, and largely seem to be a conflict between whether religion should only be addressed with a posture of sanctity or whether to sometimes indulge more joyous and lighthearted impulses inspired by participation in the faith. Some practitioners seem to strongly feel that attaching humor to any aspect of observance presents a challenge to the notion (universally held, by both camps) that God is to be considered with reverence, and that any comedic activity touching on Christian observance compromises that priority. Others seem to feel comfortable that comedy leveled at Christian practice can be done appropriately, and that it effects a sense of humility that is healthy and attaches joyous feelings to participating in the religion. Some Christians seem to instinctively understand the constructive nature of Christian comedy, and others are offended by the very idea of it. The carnival is not for everybody.

A fourth video, “Tim Hawkins on Worship Music” (GodTube.com wdzw6lnx), is a riff on the idea that perhaps church worship leaders should “...challenge us every once in a while, do something to freak us out”. He proceeds to demonstrate what he means by singing word-for-word the lyrics of a popular worship song⁸⁶ to the tune of a Led Zeppelin classic⁸⁷, complete with the original hard-driving rock track and the opening wails that singer Robert Plant is famous for.

Reactions from the GodTube audience are strong and either firmly for it or very firmly against; out of 188 comments 134 are positive (71%). Some who normally like Hawkins find that he goes too far here: “I didn’t like it. I don’t mind Tim poking fun at our often silly way of prayer like the prayer over junk food but this one struck me as overboard because worship of a Holy God is sacred and seeing him use the words in a careless manner for a laugh just doesn’t sit right.” Others condemn all of Hawkins’ work: “This guy is NOT funny – this is blasphemy and Our Sovereign Almighty Holy God is NOT mocked. Hawkins will one day have to stand before God and answer.” “Very sad. He really doesn’t understand how he defiles His awesome and sovereign God with his antics and so-called humor.” Positive remarks answer these accusations with entreaties to “lighten up” and to get a firmer handle on what is important, i.e. the message rather than the tune. Both sides deploy scripture in defense of their arguments, though the most “likes” were for a remark that noted the Psalm 100 call to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord.”

One of the most debated issues around this video performance is whether it, and performances like it, bring people into the church or drive them away. Those who feel

⁸⁶ “Shout to the Lord”, written by Darlene Zschech (1993).

⁸⁷ “Immigrant Song” (1970).

that it drives people away offer a theoretical perspective rather than anecdotal evidence, claiming that compromising the aura of sanctity of churches will so blur the line between the sacred and things “of the world” that worship will have no meaning, followers will drift away from practice, and so then drift away from God entirely⁸⁸. Others aver that every generation modernizes worship music in order to appeal to contemporary tastes, and that young people especially are much more likely to participate in churches that offer a bridge between religion and the secular culture they are surrounded by. Several people defend Hawkins as an important missionary: “I can guarantee that Tim Hawkins reaches more people for Christ through his ministry than any of us.” One woman tells of using the video as a lead-in to giving witness of her faith to an agnostic friend who previously had no interest in discussing religion with her.

Even many of those who feel that comedy and secular influences on worship music are inappropriate profess to be keen on anything that believers can use to bring more people to the church, and that imperative is the basis for many of the arguments supporting the production of Christian comedy. This tension reveals something of a disconnect between wanting a solemn experience on the one hand, and wanting to present the widest possible appeal on the other. Clearly it doesn’t work for everyone, but I argue that this tension is one of the issues that use of the ludic means to resolve: by making fun of various aspects of church practice and church culture the appeal of Christianity as an ideology and a lifestyle element is made more palatable; at the same time, because the humor is NOT made at the expense of God or of the essential tenets of the faith those are left untarnished and sanctified, the core ideologies intact for to be solemnly revered.

⁸⁸ This opinion is consistent with the findings of Finke & Stark (2005).

There is nothing particularly funny about “Bethlemian Rhapsody” (GodTube.com kg7gglnx), though a puppet show about the birth of Christ sung to the tune of Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”⁸⁹ (1975) certainly seems like a fun way to present the nativity story to children. What is interesting to note is the different reactions the audience has to fusing the music from a rock song to a key moment of Christian lore. Out of 145 total comments only one was negative⁹⁰, saying “I really don’t think God is smiling nor that He is being glorified by this.” Most remarks were something akin to “So cute!” or “What a great thing for children, can I get it on DVD?”, and a number of commenters used the opportunity to support the idea of Christian comedy generally: “Absolutely magnificent! Humor is definitely one of God's top 10 creations, and it does not take away from the sacredness of the event.” In addition, several people directly addressed the value of adapting secular music to sacred themes. This example is typical:

Great! I used to do the same thing when I was a teenager, that is, take some secular music and combine with Christian words. But I learned that [it] is better to give the glory to God with original music and words, He gave us the talent. But from time to time [it] is good to take these wonderful creations and put them in order to glorify the Name of our Lord Jesus. And if it is done with class and fun...great! The Lord must be smiling.

The contrast to how “Bethlemian Rhapsody” and Tim Hawkins’ Zeppelin-esque take on “Shout to the Lord” is striking: both use popular music, from the same era, representing similar musical styles. “Rhapsody” is a somewhat calmer tune than Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song” that Hawkins borrowed from, and that parts of it more

⁸⁹ “Is this the real birth? Is it nativity? Caught in a census, in the town of his ancestry. Open your eyes, look up to the skies and seeeeee. He’s just a poor boy, foretold by prophecy...” (and so on).

⁹⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, not one remark on the bisexuality of Queen lead singer Freddy Mercury.

closely resembles in pace and tone a song one might hear in church might explain part of the discrepancy. I suspect a larger part is that “Bethlemian Rhapsody” is a narrative⁹¹ telling a story that is oft told using non-Biblical language, while Hawkins’ song uses lyrics that directly address God. The former seems acceptable to nearly everyone (based on this small sample), while the latter bothers a substantial portion of watchers.

“The History of Worship Music – Funny and Nostalgic” (GodTube.com of19e1nu) is footage from a medley of worship songs performed at the 2013 Seeds Conference, a yearly gathering of pastors and worship leaders. The mood is both joyous and raucous, with two singers fronting a large brass band and working through portions of about a dozen well-known worship songs. The performance is enthusiastic, and the music probably more exuberant than is usual with these tunes, but the singers follow the original lyrics and don’t say or do anything humorous except smile. Nevertheless, 67% of the comments posted are negative, with remarks like “Those songs brought many into God's presence in heartfelt worship. Who's presence did these folks bring people into? I'm sure Satan was happy for the ridicule. So not impressed. WHAT'S UP GODTUBE?” and “My 9 year old just said, ‘This is so wrong. I'm sure God doesn't appreciate this.’ That sums it up, folks.” It’s hard to appreciate just what the problem is from watching the video, and none of the comments explain *why* their writers are so sure it’s awful. Crowd shots suggest the pastors in attendance were having a great time. It’s not clear what to make of the negative reaction on GodTube, but (taken in light of the reactions to

⁹¹ Bill Cosby’s “Classic Take on Noah and the Ark” (GodTube w17yylnx) is another example of an amusing take on a Biblical Narrative hosted on GodTube, and the comments are universally positive (and many of them sentimental). The piece is an audio-only track, taken from Cosby’s album “Bill Cosby Is A Very Funny Fellow...Right!” (1973).

Hawkins' "Worship Music") at minimum it seems that messing about with worship songs Goes Too Far for many Christians and either flirts with, or strays directly into, sacrilege.

Bob Smiley is another Christian comedian, and though he frequently tours with Tim Hawkins his material is more clean-humor-that-doesn't-offend-Christians rather than humor-about-Christians. "Tim Hawkins and I [Bob Smiley] Trying Out Some Tweets During Our Show" (GodTube.com ojb1cmnu) is a series of fairly innocuous one-liners that has generated few, but mostly positive, comments. However, Smiley earned one watcher's ire for even mentioning cursing ("I don't think parents know how much cussing is involved in the video game "Halo", and that's just me trying to open up the DVD case") and Halloween ("I know a lot of Christians are against Halloween, but I think it's a great way to teach my kids about the IRS. When they get home with the candy I take half of it"), opining that neither of these topics "equal Christianity". Since it is hosted on GodTube the material evidently falls within the site's standards, but that does not mean it passes muster with every Christian. This demonstrates, again, the difficulty in navigating the boundaries of Christian humor: each member of the potential audience can have a different barometer for what is appropriate.

Most of the videos on GodTube are scripted in one way or another, but there are a few exceptions. One of them, "Best of Funny Baptisms" (GodTube.com fo91jfnu), is a low-production-quality "America's Funniest Videos" style collection of full-immersion baptisms that somehow went wrong. Kids leap into the baptismal pool; swim away after the rite is performed; take the pastor down into the water with them; etc. There seems little to be offended about (kids are kids, right?), and most of the 121 comments reflect

that precise sentiment. There are dissenters, though, and the following analysis is representative of their opinions (and got the most “likes”):

Only people who are old enough to fully accept the meaning and sanctity of baptism should do that. Otherwise, what’s the difference b/w adult and child baptism...if they are kids, the parents have the responsibility to prepare them...I was not at all amused by the video in which a kid is getting baptized and the next moment he repeats the same gesture again and again...No offense to the kid or anyone, but it's little hard for me to accept that in connection with the exercise of something like baptism commissioned by God Himself... Don’t know if this is because I have a little sense of humour but I believe Christians have many other occasions to display their sense of humour than baptism...

Particularly telling is a comment string in response to the above, where a few women share thoughts regarding the kind of bitterness they find on the GodTube comment pages:

KK: I'm a little sad because I would like to share many of these videos with my unsaved friends and coworkers. However, the videos are typically followed by really judgmental comments and make Christians appear to lack a sense of humor or any sort of kindness. In fact, we appear mean and nasty and actually repel the unsaved from Christ because they fear becoming like us. We may be the only Jesus these people ever know - how do we want to represent Him?

WG: APPLAUSE CORNER HERE KK...amen...like a few others here stated..this is a serious time of reverence..BUT..THESE WERE KIDS..PEOPLE ..drop the spirit & doctrine of "RELIGIOSITY" already..these were precious babies..God is

not on HIS throne going..ooops! HE gave us the joy, the laughter we find in HIS PRESENCE....."a merry heart doeth good like a medicine" so lighten up...i feel like KELLY here..i would not be able to share this with any unsaved colleagues..due to your rudeness & lack of good common sense.....it gives us a black eye....

GL: I'm with you KK and WG! Baptism shows the serious commitment one has made to Christ, but it is to be a joyous occasion! People should be Singing, Clapping & Laughing (as in the videos) and rejoicing in the testimony of God's saving grace in a persons life and testimony through baptism! Lighten up Christians! The JOY of the Lord is our strength!

In order, these three remarks earned 61, 31, and 31 “likes”; no other remark in any other comment section I have seen on GodTube has earned as many as 40. It seems that there is a fair amount of frustration in the GodTube community-of-those-who-comment about the frequently mean and judgmental remarks that people post.

One of the attractions of Christian humor is that it can be a direct and corrective reaction against this bitter and judgmental behavior. Taken in light of the many remarks posted on the subject of humility in the GodTube comment sections (as well as Joel Kilpatrick’s analysis), Christian humor is often valued by the Christian community just for how it fosters needed humility among individuals whose holier-than-thou attitude could use deflating.

“Evangelism Linebacker – No Excuses” (GodTube.com m1c2cnnu) is the most violent video I found on GodTube. It posits that the “National Institute for Student Ministries” has come up with a new and successful method of encouraging Christian

students to evangelize: by having a man dressed in a football jersey sneak up on unsuspecting young people reluctant to share their faith and then body-slam them to the ground (or onto a table, or into a dumpster). Then he lectures them, in an aggressive tone reminiscent of sports-field trash talk (“Now get off the flo’! And go do’ to do’!”), about how important it is for them to spread the word about Jesus Christ. Once they comply, he transforms into a soft-voiced mentor.

Only five of the 56 comments have anything negative to say about the video, and none of those make any comment on the violent nature of the evangelism intervention. Evidently violence is acceptable to GodTube and to its users, at least when presented in an absurd and humorous context.

Only one of the five comments disapproving of the video mentions the issue of race in this video, and even that remark barely unpacks it: “Lame, Mr. T hittin’ white folks. Waay LAME!”. The Evangelism Linebacker character is black, and he is the only person of color in the video. All seventeen of the students he tackles, every person in the background, and the narrator are white. It’s not subtle: clearly the linebacker is black and speaks like a bad caricature of Mr. T in order to seem more menacing and intimidating. Racial stereotyping does not constitute Going Too Far on GodTube.

The setup for “Flaws of Biblical Proportions, Finding the Perfect Small Group Leader” (GodTube.com ojmo2fnu) is a series of interviews for leader of a church small group⁹². A succession of actors playing Bible characters are quizzed about their faults, and each one in turn is rejected after being embarrassed with accusations based on scripture. Samson is rejected for his weaknesses regarding haircuts and women; Abraham

⁹² “Small groups” are breakout sessions of a few people, often conducted in a congregation member’s home, for the purpose of discussing in an intimate setting how to apply the lessons of Christianity into one’s daily life.

is no good because he lied about Sarah being his sister rather than his wife, and slept with the maid; Peter is reminded that Christ called him Satan after Peter denied Him three times; King David takes a hit because of the whole Bathsheba incident; Paul is disqualified because he oversaw the persecution of Christians before receiving his calling. Finally a guy named Greg gets the job, even though he himself is not sure about his qualifications. Most commenters inferred the not-so-subtle point: you don't have to be perfect to be a servant of God. However, several were indignant: "Comments that make the Leaders of Judeo-Christianity look like idiot-fools! You go ahead... I love humor, but I don't denigrate."

"Shallow Small Group" (GodTube.com fjbef1nu) is a representative example of parabolic humor in that it sarcastically mocks all the elements that small-group church meetings are meant to foster in order to strengthen the argument for embracing just those elements. By ticking off each meaningful aspect of such encounters and rejecting them, it uses absurdity to highlight precisely the valuable discussion and fellowship that such groups are designed to facilitate.

Are you tired of small groups always getting into your business? Trying to get you to share your feelings, discuss your past, confess your sins? Are you just looking for a place to kick-it, network, maybe get some free grub? Me too! That's why I created what I believe to be the world's first Openly Shallow Small Group. We're not here to deal with messy stuff like feelings and emotions; you got problems? You deal with 'em. You're an adult; life ain't easy, so stop the pity party! We all have our issues. We don't really want to "do life together". Frankly, at Shallow Small Group we try not to do anything at all. You'll never hear us use the term "unpack that thought"; we're sure it's packed away for a really good reason. You'll never hear us use the term "accountability" unless we're talking about a person who deals with numbers: "Hey dude, thanks for doing my taxes! You have

great accountability.” And spiritual growth? Who wants growth? I had a growth removed last week; [whispers] it wasn’t pleasant. There’s no pressure here to remember each other’s names [some men greet each other with a lot of “dude” and “buddy”]; we know you have a name, and that’s the important thing. Group discussion? You’ve got tickets to the big game? Sweet, let’s spend some time on that! Oh, you and your wife are struggling financially? There’s tension in the relationship? Eh, that’s not really the vibe we’re going for. We avoid conflict like the plague; “Who wants cake?!” And there will never ever be an awkward silence; that’s our guarantee to you. We hate bad theology just as much as the next guy, and we know that the surest way to avoid bad theology is to avoid theology altogether. And outreach? This [dips a tortilla chip] is the only outreach you’ll ever have to do. Some people say we’re superficial, but hey: the word “super” is in “superficial”! And who doesn’t want to be super?! Shallow Small Group: ‘cuz when things get too deep, people drown.

“God is Not a Pancake” (GodTube.com oobj2fnu) is perhaps the silliest of comedy videos to be found on GodTube; it is a series of short statements by eight people (some appear more than once) arguing that God is not a pancake. No one presents a counterargument averring God’s pancake-ness, there is no reference to what the speakers (or the video) might be responding to, and my research revealed no statement by anyone anywhere at any time suggesting that God might be a pancake⁹³. Remarks within the video range from the simple, “God is not doughy”, to the more complex:

Some of the greatest theological minds of our time have told us that God is bigger than the Boogeyman. He’s bigger than Godzilla, he’s bigger than ALL the monsters on TV. Thus, He must be bigger than a pancake because Godzilla, and all these other monsters, are bigger than a pancake. It just makes good, sound theological sense. Now... on the other hand.... I LIKE pancakes.

⁹³ The only possibility I found is *God is in the Pancakes* (2010), a book about a teenage hospital volunteer whose response to her mentor’s euthanasia request is to instead feed the sick man a lot of pancakes.

It's a strange video, and perfectly absurd. It's funny (in a "wow-this-is-really-odd-and-goofy" sort of way), and uses mild blasphemy to encourage the viewer to consider the nature of God and remember that He cannot be quantified by analogy to something mundane.

"Bill the Church Hopper" (GodTube.com ob2m2mnu) means to send a message about what is really important about participating in a church by illustrating what is not. A man narrates his way through his typical Sunday morning and the various churches he attends in order to "get what he wants" because he "knows what it takes to lead a good Christian life". The first church has the best bagels; second has the best coffee ("They serve Starbucks!"); church three has terrific greeters ("They give the best hugs! You really feel the warmth"); fourth is for worship; back to the third for the sermon ("The pastor gives me the most things to think about, but doesn't make me feel too guilty when I don't think about them"); next church is where he takes communion ("Cuz they give you an entire dinner roll. Boom! There's no butter for it, but it's ok it's the body of Christ, doesn't need butter"); over to another church for the potluck ("They really know how to feed my soul. It's all about customizing your religious experience. God helps those who help themselves, Jesus said that. Well, it might have been Benjamin Franklin, but it doesn't matter: they're both smart dudes"). When asked about his spiritual life he waffles a bit, then muses that he might have to find a church for that.

The video is both satirical and parabolic, an analysis confirmed by a comment posted by its creator: "I created this video to illustrate that church is more than just GOING. Church is about LIVING it." Roughly half of the 53 comments indicate that their writers "get" the message and appreciate it, but the other half seem to think it's a

genuine interview and take the church-hopper character to task for being such a superficial church-goer. Several viewers use the video as an opportunity to reflect on the perceived need for churches to find ways to keep people coming, suggesting that there is some awareness of the contingencies of the “religious marketplace” and the conflicts between the ideal and the pragmatic that catering to it can produce. This example is typical:

This definitely speaks to our consumerist society that is all about me, and if I can't get what I want I will go somewhere else. What is the church to do? Is it possible for one church to totally cater to all these desires, or is it even advisable that they should? The more I consider our culture, the more I see a spiritually hungry group of people that need the truth of the Word of God and in such a compelling and relational way that they will remain seeking and open to the gospel.

Beyond GodTube

GodTube is the most comprehensive repository for videos specifically curated for Christian content, but there are other Christian comedy videos available in digital space. The two discussed below seem like candidates for GodTube but are not featured on the site; unfortunately, without being able to speak to a representative of Salem News Network I am not able to offer a definitive answer why. It's possible the videos do not meet Salem's standards, but it's just as likely that no one has attempted to post them on the site or that their creators prefer they not be.

Based entirely on the texts themselves, however, it seems they are on the far side of a line GodTube is not willing to cross. The videos are transgressive, sacrilegious, anti-hierarchical, challenging, provocative; however, they are clearly pro-Christian. In short,

these videos are exceptional examples of Christian carnivalesque humor, and contribute further insight into the choices their makers made regarding what is appropriate for the genre.

“Baby Got Book” (whiteboydj.com) predates GodTube by a year (the video was released in 2006); it is the oldest Christian comedy music video I am aware of. Produced and performed by Southpaw, the nom-de-rap of Christian preacher and church-founder⁹⁴ Dan Smith, it combines new lyrics with the music of Sir Mix A Lot’s “Baby Got Back” (1992) to extoll the desirability of women who read the Bible. It’s clever⁹⁵:

*I like big Bibles and I can not lie, You Christian brothers can't deny,
That when a girl walks in with a KJV and a bookmark in Proverbs you get stoked.
Got her name engraved, so you know that girl is saved.
It looks like one of those large ones, with plenty o' space in the margins,
Oh baby, I wanna read witcha, cause your Bible's got pictures.
My minister tried to console me, but that book you got makes ("M-m-me so holy").⁹⁶
Ooh, momma-mia, you say you want koinonia,
Well, bless me, bless me, and teach me about John Wesley.
I saw her praying while I was DJing
She got grace... pretty face, she ain't goin' down to the bad place.
I'm tired of heathen guys, sayin' they like pocket-size,
Ask the average Christian to take a look: she's gotta pack much Book!
So... Fellas (Yeah), fellas (Yeah)
Has your girlfriend got the Book (Oh yeah!)
Well, read it (Read it!), read it (Read it!), read that Holy Book
Baby got Book*

NIV with a ribbon bookmark...

⁹⁴ His church is Momentum Christian Church in Cleveland OH.

⁹⁵ It’s also popular. The YouTube-hosted version has 2,670,467 views and 5,967 comments as of 3/15/14.

⁹⁶ In addition to being clever, it’s long. See Appendix Two for the rest of the lyrics.

Baby got Book!

NIV with a ribbon bookmark!

I like 'em leather and bound, it's 50 pounds.

I just can't understand how it is, some weenie wants the Bible on CD

She wanna get you saved, Amen! Double up! A-men!

I ain't talkin' about a paraphrase, 'cuz Paul wouldn't use those anyways.

Like 'em real thick and red-lettered, you can't find nothin' better,

Southpaw's in love, Bibles that big are unheard of!

So I'm sittin' here thinkin' "What if... I find me a girl that shows midriff?"

You can have those bimbos, I'll keep those chick that do devos.

A word to the Christian sistas, I can't resist ya'll do God's time witcha

But I gotta be straight when I say I wanna pray, til the break of day.

Baby, got it goin' on, like the wife in Pro-verbs 31.

We just might get engaged, when we finish reading this page,

Cuz it's worn and it's torn, and I know this girl's reborn.

So ladies (yeah), ladies (yeah)

Do you wanna save people from Hades (yeah) Then read it...'til the pages fall out

Even white preachers got to shout, Baby got Book!

Thompson Chain with big red letters,

Baby got Book!

Yeah baby, when it comes to a good book

Stephen King's resume just can't compare

39 + 27 = 66 books, and if you're Catholic... there's even more.

So your girlfriend quotes Bill Hybels, but does she got a big Bible?

Cuz that little thing she's got won't start a revival

My Bible study don't want none, Unless you got Book, Hon.

You can read Clancy or Grisham, But please don't lose this Book!

Some brothers wanna play that hard hard role, and tell you that Book's too old.

So they toss it and burn it, and I pull up quick to just learn it.

*So your girl likes paperback? Well I ain't down with that.
 Cuz my girlfriend's hot her Bible's rockin', and she's got good doctrine.
 To the atheist chicks who try to dis: you ain't it Miss Priss!
 Give me a Christian, I'm insistin', and I'll greet her with some holy kissin'.
 Some pervert tried to chase, But he didn't make it past first base,
 She's quick to resist temptation, and she loves a new translation.
 So ladies who were lost and found, if you want the triple-six thrown down,
 Dial 1-800-reads-a-lot, and teach me about those Psalms.
 Baby got Book! NIV with a ribbon bookmark.
 Baby got Book! Thompson Chain with big red letters.
 Bible college knowledge, but she still got Book [4x]*

The video is funny just for what it does to change the original song's salacious lyrics with words about big Bibles and Christian girls, complete with references to three translations, the book of Proverbs, and John Wesley. Images include a six-foot Bible and enormous gold jewelry spelling out K-J-V⁹⁷. It's also blatantly sexual, especially the "M-m-me-so-holy" line spoken by a young woman in her best come-hither voice. It is undoubtedly offensive to some Christians for its flippant treatment of the Bible and for sexualizing the virtue of following Christianity. On the other hand, its lyrics overtly support Christianity by encouraging bold and conspicuous reading of the Bible, discouraging physical immodesty, and encouraging both young men and young women to prefer potential mates who are committed Bible-reading Christians.

Taken altogether the "Baby Got Book" video seems a pro-Christian appeal, it is funny, and it does use motifs of Christianity itself as the comic foil; it includes sacrilege, and is transgressive by virtue of the sexualization of faith; these factors taken altogether, the video is an example of carnivalesque humor. It is bold enough to have used a

⁹⁷ King James Version.

sexually-charged tune, to sexualize the virtue of reading the Bible, and to make flippant reference to scripture, Biblical figures, and two famous church leaders. However, the video explicitly insults no one, especially God. It Goes Far Enough to be a challenge to normative standards for how Christians regard the Bible and virtue, but avoids Going Too Far by presenting anything that is indefensible, blasphemous, or graphic.

“What Does George Fox Say?” (YouTube.com phsvqbclaas⁹⁸) is surely the most carnival-like carnivalesque video included in this study, if not the most ever made. It follows the music and video motifs of Norwegian comedy duo Ylvis’ cult hit “What Does the Fox Say?”⁹⁹ (2013) closely enough to nearly be an homage, yet at the same time it does good service towards illustrating George Fox’s evangelistic story and religious philosophy.

A group of Friends enter a meetinghouse, and after contemplation one of them rises to give witness. He begins to sing the story of George Fox, and shortly his outfit is transformed to resemble 17th century English dress complete with wide-brimmed hat (plus a red leotard...). Throughout the video the scenes change to illustrate what is being sung about, and during the chorus sections other Quakers (sometimes in period costume, sometimes contemporarily dressed as if for a pajama-party/rave) dance in synchrony with arms straight out and hands pointed downwards. The voice is always of the first singer (in nasal falsetto), but each section is lip-synched by a different Friend. The words being sung are subtitled throughout, and during chorus sections (which, as in the original, are completely nonsensical: “ning-ning ning-ning ning-ning-ning-ning” is a close

⁹⁸ It’s worth watching. Please watch it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhsvqbCIaAs>

⁹⁹ “What Does the Fox Say?” was YouTube’s top trending video of 2013 (Hartley 2013). Released 9/3/13, as of 3/15/14 it has had over 381 million views and garnered nearly 833k comments.

approximation) the subtitles are quotes from the actual writings of George Fox. Towards the end an actor playing George himself, in full period costume, helps sing the nonsensical bits while working a light-up hula-hoop. Below is a complete transcript of the subtitles:

*1650s England, Kingless country, Civil war,
Dudes in robes, the only way to communicate with God.
All pay tithes, And all take oaths, Churches full of empty forms.
A shoemaker, begins to preach: What does George Fox say?!*
"I saw that there was an ocean of death, but flowing over it was an infinite ocean of love." What's George Fox say?!
"Be patterns and be examples in all countries, places, and nations, wherever you go." What's George Fox say?!
"Be still and cool in your own mind and spirit and you will feel the principle of God." What's George Fox say?!
"I heard a voice, which said, 'Jesus Christ can speak to your condition.' When I heard it, my heart did leap for joy." What's George Fox say?!
*Shaggy hair, Leather clothes, He comes for prayer then he steps on toes.
He cannot stand, Bad theology, He serves a jail term or three.
His jailers rise, and follow him, He's an angel in disguise.
His piercing eyes, see your course, cause he's connecting to his So-o-o-o-ource, So-o-o-o-ource, So-o-o-o-ource.
He's connecting to his So-o-o-o-ource, So-o-o-o-ource, So-o-o-o-ource. What does George Fox say?!*
"The Lord does not dwell in these man-made temples but rather in people's hearts." What's George Fox say?!
"Christ says this, and the apostles say that, but what can you say?" What's George Fox say?!
"Walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone." What's George Fox say?! What does George Fox say?!
The insight of George Fox, was that the Spirit can guide us.

*It talks in a still small voice, of Love and Truth. What do you hear?
 Will you keep yourself open to peace and integrity? What do you hear?
 You have a guardian Angel hiding in your soul. What do you hear?
 What do you hear? I want to I want to I want to know!*

The visuals, the music, the clothes, the props, and the ridiculous nonsensical verbalizations during the chorus sections of the video are absolutely comedic and absurd, and make raucous fun of a faith tradition that is typically noted for its conservative solemnity and absence of ostentation. At the same time, the lyrics (“shaggy hair, leather clothes” perhaps excepted) respectfully tell the essentials of George Fox’s contribution to Christian religious philosophy and share his words without any sort of adulteration. On the one hand it’s a joke at the expense of George Fox and the Quakers, and on the other hand it’s a straight-up witness to the (genius? revelations-given-to?) George Fox and the most essential points of his teachings. It is carnivalesque, and it is also missionary.

Such was the intention of the video’s makers, all of whom are Quakers. Ben Guaraldi produced the video (he is also the primary performer) with the help of “about 30 Friends” from the Salem Quarterly Meeting, and the meetinghouse in the film is the Framingham Meeting House in Massachusetts. He hopes that those who have watched it have learned that “Quakers still exist and a little more about us, too”. At the end of the video are two links, one to “Learn more about the Quaker way, practiced by 500,000 people worldwide”, and another to “Find a Quaker Meeting near you”. So far¹⁰⁰ the video has been viewed 136,000 times, suggesting that comedy has been an effective tool for giving people opportunities to find out more about Quakerism.

¹⁰⁰ As of 3/15/13.

Rock band Everclear's "Hater Jesus" music video (2006) is an example of taking the grotesque critique too far for the widest Christian audience, moving past the of where the unique ethos of the carnivalesque protects unconventional styles of discourse and straying into satire that merely offends rather than illuminates. Neither "Hater Jesus" nor the corresponding video seems to be accepted by the Christian community as a contribution to consideration of the faith, and the video is not featured on GodTube. Outside of the negative audience response, otherwise it is a good example of a carnivalesque, flagrantly irreverent (many have said blasphemous) text that seeks to send a strong Christian message by presenting a critical grotesque of Jesus (Shouse & Fraley 2010). In the video, Jesus has an orgy with strippers, knocks out an old lady, steals from a homeless man, and rolls a joint with a page torn from a Bible. But Everclear's front man Art Alexakis describes himself as a devout Christian (Kaufman 2006), and explains that the video was meant as a critique of what he perceived to be the contemporary militarization of Christian youth (Shouse & Fraley 2010). I would argue that a carnivalesque interpretation of the video supports Alexakis' intention, but whether it does or does not is ultimately irrelevant since the boundaries of effective carnivalesque presentation were exceeded by elements of the video and so it has not inspired productive dialogue within the Christian community.

Bob Smiley

Bob Smiley started his comedy career as a college student answering a student-union talent contest in 1997. He honed his skills while touring as a merchandise manager for Christian Contemporary bands Newsboys, Third Day, and Mercy Me in the late 90s and early 00s, and today is one of the most prominent Christian stand-up comedians in

the United States. He tours regularly and has released seven DVDs of his stage performances. Short clips from those DVDs as well as low-quality video taken by members of his audiences are posted to GodTube, and a larger selection is also featured on YouTube.

Smiley sees his work as a ministry that supports Christianity, and that to promote the faith is why he does comedy. He told me that he was not interested in doing a career in stand-up (he started doing it to help pay for college), but it dawned on him that it provided him with a captive audience just waiting for him to say something. He realized that "...if I can make people laugh then I can draw them in and then tell them about their Savior. So, every show of mine has some challenge or testimony in it. In short, I use comedy to promote the Gospel." When asked about how comedy works as a way to promote Christianity, he indicated that as far as how it works as a delivery medium it's pretty simple: comedians preach what their passionate about, so using it to preach the Gospel is a natural¹⁰¹.

Smiley's focus as a comic is about providing clean entertainment that families can enjoy together without fear of being offended or shocked, rather than on promoting Christian humility or providing people a way to laugh at aspects of their faith. Why is doing so important? Smiley believes that families that laugh together are closer, that they bond, and that Christian comedy is important because it allows families a chance to sit

¹⁰¹ "Every comedian preaches. Listen to any comedian and he some major theme he's talking about. It may be a racial issue. It may be political. It may be something as simple as a hatred for the Snuggie. But every comedian preaches on stage by sharing [his] opinions to a crowd. So sharing the Gospel is pretty easy. Comedians talk about what they are passionate about. I'm passionate about my faith so I talk a lot about it. The other thing that makes sharing the Gospel easy is that I'm making people laugh. Christians more than anyone else should be free to laugh and have joy all around them. So I'm pointing that out to a room that is already full of joy."

together for an hour and laugh. He loves looking out into the audience and seeing a father with his teenage son “laughing out loud, high-fiving each other”, and that he is certain they draw closer together as a family.

Mr. Smiley told me that the reason Christian comedy is needed is as “an alternative to the filth that is out there.” He feels that there is “less and less” “clean” entertainment for families to watch now, that “almost every sitcom is full of dirty sex jokes and course language”, and that he is among those providing healthier fare. There are plenty of “good things” in this world to poke fun at, and Smiley does not agree that comedy has to be daring or borderline offensive in order to make an audience laugh¹⁰².

Mr. Smiley has three rules for deciding whether material is going to make it into his act, and like those identified by Joel Kilpartrick of LarkNews they are personal and subjective. First: it has to be funny to him; he believes there are two kinds of comedy, Funny and Good Try. Second: it has to be clean. Comedians write about what they know, so Smiley figures that if he lives a clean life then his stage show will naturally come out clean as well. He “lives [his] life clean so that writing clean comedy comes out easy.” Third: the material has to be funny enough and clean enough to make it by his three sons, whom he says are brutally honest about the funny. Also, he knows that he would never run anything by his sons¹⁰³ that would compromise his second rule about keeping the material clean and family-friendly.

Reactions on the GodTube comment sections about Smiley’s work are largely positive but do vary, and Smiley acknowledges that he gets remarks that range from one

¹⁰² He knows that “everyone has their own individual idea as to what is funny and every[one] has their own individual idea as to what is clean/Christian”, and he concedes that finding where those two circles overlap for any particular audience can be difficult.

¹⁰³ In one email Smiley referred to his sons as his “three tax deductions”; the man never seems to stop cracking wise.

extreme to the other. He knows that there's always going to be people who don't like his comedy, but as long as they're listening he's satisfied¹⁰⁴.

Summary

GodTube.com is a Christian website whose comedy channel features videos that are comedic and have the effect of reifying watchers' commitment to and enjoyment of Christian practice and culture. None of the videos truly qualify as carnivalesque, demonstrating that Christian humor can have carnival-like functions without being transgressive enough to fully qualify as exemplars of Bakhtin's theory. Effectively GodTube has become a site of "church", where God is worshipped through speech and song and points of Christian ideology and theology are debated and disseminated; as such, it blurs the line between the sacred and the profane. By combining both sacred and secular elements it is an example of progressive spirituality, where religious practitioners use profane spaces and modalities in an effort to proselytize and further the concerns of the sacred as well as the community that celebrates it.

The parameters for what constitutes appropriate Christian comedy on GodTube are a negotiation among the keepers of the site, the producers of the content, and the audience which debates the merits of that content. According to its published rules GodTube seeks to foster civil discussion by forbidding vulgarity, profanity, overt sexuality, and personal insult; however, the discussions via user comments indicate that

¹⁰⁴ "Some will say it's too edgy. Some will say it's not edgy enough. Some will say they don't care for how fast I talk. Some Christians are dead set on drinking and others are Catholic¹⁰⁴. So almost everyday I get a Facebook message saying I'm the best comedian in the world and everyday I get some message saying I shouldn't call myself a Christian or a comedian. I like any and all responses because it tells me that people are still listening to me. When the hate mail and praise mail stops, that's when I'll get worried."

passions run high and civility is often difficult to maintain. GodTube's parent Salem News Network also insists that the validity of Christianity never be challenged and both content and comments reflect that this rule is held; however, without knowing what content GodTube may have rejected it is difficult to determine where precisely this line is drawn.

The variety of topics used for comedic fodder on GodTube indicates that the site managers tolerate a great deal of latitude, and most comments indicate approval. Users appreciate what humor does to foster humility, to provide perspective, to foster joy, and to appeal to a broader range of potential followers. Dissenters typically feel that comedy has no place in Christianity altogether or that specific examples have gone too far in mocking cherished practices. While rare is the video that passes completely without some remark of dismay, as a general rule those that describe a Christian practice on the way to a joke about how ridiculous people can be, rather than jokes suggesting those practices themselves are ridiculous, are most acceptable to the widest audience.

The appropriate use of music is a flashpoint of disagreement among GodTube users. Videos that parody contemporary popular songs by swapping in lyrics on a Christian theme are among the most popular, as are musical performances by professional comics. When these use music to retell a Biblical narrative or to offer a corrective lesson they earn little ire. However, any alteration of traditional worship music can incite a great deal of passionate disapproval.

The comments made by GodTube users on its video content reveal a lively debate among Christians about the appropriateness of humor when it is applied to matters of church, and reflects a conflict over whether religion should only be addressed with a

posture of sanctity or whether to indulge joyous and lighthearted impulses inspired by participation in the faith. Some practitioners strongly feel that attaching humor to any aspect of observance presents a challenge to the notion that God should be held in reverence, and that any comedic activity touching on Christian observance compromises that priority and constitutes sacrilege. Others feel comfortable with Christian comedy and feel that it effects a healthy sense of humility, insinuates joy into Christian observance, and acknowledges, in a way that celebrates rather than denigrates, typically hidden suspicions that certain practices and motifs within Christian culture can come off as a little ridiculous. Some Christians seem to instinctively understand the carnivalesque nature of some Christian comedy, and others are simply offended by all of it. Again, the carnival is not for everybody.

Comments on GodTube videos reflect a tension in contemporary American Christianity between wanting a reverent experience that is distinct from secular culture, and at the same time wanting to present Christianity as a joyful lifestyle choice that incorporates (and relates to) aspects of that same secular culture. In addition, this last is an important tool in the religious marketplace when trying to both attract new followers and retain young people brought up in the faith. Ironically, this tension is one of the issues that the carnivalesque strategy has the potential to resolve: by making fun of various aspects of church practice and church culture the appeal of Christianity as an ideology and a lifestyle element is made more palatable, relatable, and fun; at the same time, because the humor is not made at the expense of God or of the essential tenets of the faith these are left untarnished and sanctified.

Comedic GodTube videos very often use humor to carry a corrective or moral message much as does a parable, and (in contrast to LarkNews) producers confirm that this corrective message is intentionally made (indeed, it is often the primary function of the video). This parabolic element uses many of the carnival elements such as sacrilege and counter-hierarchy, and for many readers seems to act as the specific mechanism that bridges the comedy that makes fun of the Christian subject and the reification of that subject that is ultimately effected.

Christian videos that exemplify the carnivalesque are not posted on GodTube (and according to GodTube's rules probably cannot be). However, the popularity of "Baby Got Book" suggests that comically sexualizing Christian practice is an acceptable appeal strategy for many Christian viewers. "What Does George Fox Say?" demonstrates that carnivalesque humor can be effectively used as an explicit vehicle for Christian evangelization.

The example of stand-up comic Bob Smiley suggests that one of the reasons people produce (and by extension, consume) Christian comedy is from a notion that laughter is good for families, and that families need a clean alternative to the "filth" that he feels prevails on television. His rules for keeping his material appropriate are that it must be funny, it must be clean (and will be if he lives his life in a clean way), and that his own family must agree that his material meets those standards.

Chapter Seven: God Jokes

Christian Humor Beyond the Carnival

Even jokes centered on Christianity, which has traditionally left little room for humor and about which even today many believers feel humor is inappropriate, can sometimes just be jokes: funny just for the sake of a little mirth. This is true of most postings on GodTube, which for the most part is a vehicle for really corny (and often, really old) jokes. For the most part they are of two types: humor that has nothing particularly to do with Christianity but that is acceptable to a prurient Christian audience, and Christian jokes that are so mild one could get away with them at a church picnic, if not a church service.

Very little of God Jokes' content is carnivalesque. Some of it doesn't qualify because the humor has nothing to do with Christianity; rather, the jokes meet the administrator's standards for clean humor acceptable for a Christian audience. Other jokes don't qualify because, although they do feature content relating to Christianity, that content provides ancillary details of the joke but has nothing to do with what is being made fun of. It either lacks the form (making fun of that which it means to reify) or the effect (reifying that which is mocked) that Bakhtin described.

On the other hand I would make the case that, in some sense, every example of pro-Christian humor that takes as its subject some aspect of Christian culture, practice, or belief contributes to enlarging room for the carnivalesque effect. By insinuating humor into the Christian conversation, innocuously and without making the butt of the joke from the included Christian element, this non-carnivalesque humor conditions audiences to accept the notion that Christian humor can be safe, constructive, and without casualty.

Also, these jokes remain carnivalesque-like according to the aspect of the theory that holds laughter to be a way to more fully marry religious belief to lived experience, and as an alternative mode of inquiry that provides insights into one's beliefs that only laughter can provide.

This dissertation has been focused on examples of Christian humor, how it functions and how it is received, and the parameters for successfully deploying the carnivalesque and the near-carnivalesque as determined by various producers. In this chapter I continue that study, describing examples of Christian humor on the God Jokes page and analyzing those examples to get a sense of the parameters this particular content producer finds appropriate. In addition, I investigate the God Jokes content towards further describing the ways that some pro-Christian Christian humor functions within the Christian conversation.

A Christian Puppy

A Baptist couple decide that they want to get a dog. As they are walking down the street in town, they notice that a sign in the pet shop is advertising "Christian Puppies." Their interest piqued, they go inside.

"How do you know they're Christian puppies?"

"Watch," says the owner, as he takes one of the dogs and says, "Fetch the Bible."

The dog runs over to the desk, and grabs the Bible in its mouth and returns.

Putting the Bible on the floor, the owner says, "Find Psalm 23." The dog flips pages with its paw until he reaches the right page, and then stops. Amazed and delighted, the couple purchase the dog and head home.

That evening, they invite some friends over and show them the dog, having him run through his Psalm 23 routine. Impressed, one of the visitors asks "Does he also know 'regular' commands?"

"Gee, we don't know. We didn't ask," replies the husband.

Turning to the dog, he says, "Sit." The dog sits. He says, "Lie down." The dog lies

down. He says "Roll over." The dog rolls over.

He says "Heel." The dog runs over to him, jumps up on the sofa, puts both paws on the owner's forehead and bows his head.

"Oh look!" the wife exclaims. "He's PENTECOSTAL!" (11-8-13)¹⁰⁵

“Christian Puppy” is the joke posted November 8 2013 on the Christian Humor/God Jokes¹⁰⁶ Facebook home page, distributed to the newsfeeds of anyone whose personal Facebook account is subscribed to that page. It’s typical of the fare offered by God Jokes in that it’s fairly brief and fairly mild. The joke employs tried-and-true elements of inoffensive humor: an absurd setup, a pun, and a silly punch line. A kid could probably get away with telling it at Sunday school.

The joke is on Christians (so simplistic even a puppy can follow along!) and the punch line makes fun of the prayer-healing practice that is common to (though hardly restricted to) Pentecostal denominations. It’s a “feel-good” version of Christian humor, one that makes a joke of Christians and Christian practice for the simple purpose of bringing a smile to the face of the reader, thereby to fortify positive feelings attached to his or her affiliation with the Christian faith. Nevertheless, it makes use of remarks and narrative setups that flirt with blasphemy, and that challenge hierarchically distributed and enforced notions of the “proper” way to address and consider the faith.

Facebook/Christian Humor

¹⁰⁵ Specific Facebook postings are difficult to precisely cite since each is not assigned a discrete Universal Resource Locator (URL) address. The Facebook “page” for God Jokes is www.facebook.com/christianhumor, with no further extension regardless of which specific content is being viewed. For each posting quoted I provide the original date of the post.

¹⁰⁶ Although the icon for the page reads “Christian Humor God Jokes”, its name (for purposes of searching within Facebook, and reflected in the URL page header) is simply “Christian Humor”. In order to avoid confusing the page with the topic of Christian humor write large, however, in this dissertation I refer to the page as “God Jokes”.

God Jokes is a Facebook page that posts clean Christian jokes and forwards them to whomever has “liked” their page. Since October of 2010 it has been posting jokes on a semi-regular basis; some months it’s every other day, while other months go by with only one or two postings¹⁰⁷. The page has 20,951 followers,¹⁰⁸ and visitors to the home page are invited to “Join our community gathered around a godly sense of humor!”¹⁰⁹ The stated desires of the page’s creators are to:

1. prove that being a Christian is not being religious¹¹⁰ or boring.
2. gather all available Christian jokes.
3. give you a giggle. ([facebook.com/christianhumor/info](https://www.facebook.com/christianhumor/info))

God Jokes is a “closed” page in that only those with administrator status are allowed to post content, although the “about” statement does invite users to send in jokes for consideration. Of course it’s embedded in a social media site, so users are welcome to make comments on the humorous postings. Unfortunately, those comments are of little use to this study since they are almost exclusively short approving remarks like “funny”, “lol”, “cute!”, or “ha ha ha”. Occasionally someone will opine on doctrine or on how the

¹⁰⁷ As I edit this sentence on 3/18/14, there has been no posting on the God Jokes page since 2/21/13. Posts prior to that one were 2/20, 2/17, 2/10, 2/2, 1/13, 1/10, 1/6, and 12/31. This is a representative example of the irregularity of posts.

¹⁰⁸ As of 3/18/14.

¹⁰⁹ On July 27 2013 the administrator posted a message to the page’s fans rather than a joke. It read: “*10K fans - We did it! Next step? Do you think we can gather 100K members ? Well, we shall see, it's not that important. What matters is that we are saved by the grace of God, because he loves such sinners like us. And this is why we laugh at ourselves, because we so much not deserve that love. God bless you.*”

¹¹⁰ It would be interesting to know what is meant by “being a Christian but not being religious”. Without the opportunity to talk to the page administrator I cannot know, but I suspect the statement means to disavow a sanctimonious attitude. It could also mean a rejection of denominational or institutional affiliation. A third possibility is that it means to identify a “Christian” moral lifestyle without religious belief, but this seems unlikely considering the frequent references to God that appear in the page’s content.

joke parallels something in their own life, and some of these remarks are fascinating¹¹¹.

However, they offer no insight into the deployment of Christian humor except for the tautological proposition that those who have “liked” this page universally approve of what it offers. In this it differs from GodTube, whose audience comments reflect a more contested view of the constructive value of Christian humor.

At Carnival’s Edge

“A Christian Puppy” is typical of the content featured on the God Jokes page in that it is decidedly gentler and less sharp than the content offered by LarkNews or hosted by GodTube. Typically these jokes offer far less over which readers might take offense, and do not criticize Christian practices or cultural touchstones in such a way that readers are inspired to rise righteously to their defense. In this way God Jokes provides less data than LarkNews or GodTube on approaching the limits of Going Too Far, but provides a better sense of what constitutes Going Far Enough.

Most of God Jokes’ postings are comprised of text, but on November 15 2013 it offered a cartoon¹¹² showing the line of animals entering Noah’s ark. Pairs of animals such as elephants, ostriches, hippos, geese and so on are queued up followed by two green dinosaurs who are standing way at the back. One has turned to the other to speak

¹¹¹ An example: in response to a cartoon that shows dinosaurs missing the trip on Noah’s ark, several people commented that humans and dinosaurs did indeed inhabit the Earth at the same time. One explanation, featuring ideas of unknown provenance: *They were here in the first Earth age when we were in our spiritual bodies...when Lucifer was so good God promoted him to be his left hand man, then he rebelled and a third of Gods children followed him so instead of God destroying all of His children, He shook the Earth (the Katabolt) hence why the Earth is now on a 90 degree axis and destroyed that age and created flesh, to offer us salvation, and ultimately to defeat Lucifer. There is another great shaking going to take place. The Earth longs to be back where it's was, where north is true north”* (November 15 2013).

¹¹² The cartoon in question was originally produced for Reverendum.com, posted to that site on 10/19/06, and is copyrighted by GCI Inc. Tiny script found between the drawing and the text reads: “See Genesis 6-8”.

and the caption reads: “*No way man... You know I don't wait in long lines.*” The joke provides an explanation for why the dinosaurs died out that does not compromise a literalist take on the Bible as a record of world history. The image makes fun of the Noah’s ark story in an absurd sort of way (talking dinosaurs? who have experience with long lines?), but at the same time uses this humor to reject the scientific data showing the earth to be far older than a literalist reading of the Bible suggests.

The joke is obviously silly (again: talking dinosaurs), but nevertheless it reifies Christianity along two separate tracks: for the first part it provides succor to the fundamentalist strain of Christianity insisting that a literalist take on the Bible is essential doctrine; for the second part it provides a way for Christians who do not insist on Biblical literalism to laugh off the (to them) preposterous idea reflected in the comic, thereby to feel comfortable participating in a religion harboring doctrinal positions that would otherwise insult their intelligence. By making light of the doctrine in a ludic manner it is easily dismissed, allowing Christians who embrace scientifically grounded knowledge some assurance that theirs is a religion they can continue to embrace¹¹³.

On October 7 2013 God Jokes posted the story of John, the only Protestant in a Catholic neighborhood. On each Friday of Lent¹¹⁴ he (unintentionally) drives the neighborhood crazy with the smell of a juicy steak on the grill while everyone else is eating cold tuna. To solve this problem the men convince John to convert, and a priest baptizes him with the words: “*You were born a Baptist, you were raised a Baptist, and now you are a Catholic.*” Thinking the problem solved, the neighborhood is dismayed the

¹¹³ The cartoon posted 10/9/13 works as a carnivalesque message in exactly the same ways. Mr. and Mrs. Unicorn are lying in bed, Mr. reading the paper. He reports: “*Big storm’s a brewin’.*” Mrs. retorts: “*Then I’m glad we didn’t go on that cruise thing with your whack-job friend Noah.*”

¹¹⁴ Catholics traditionally do not eat meat on Lenten Fridays (though somehow fish is allowed) as a symbolic sacrifice in recognition of Christ’s crucifixion on Good Friday.

next year to again smell a delicious steak being grilled! They gather at John's just in time to witness him sprinkling water on the steak and intoning: "*You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, and now you are a fish.*"

The story of John and his steak is a joke, yet it manages to make a mockery of Catholic observance of the Lenten season, conversion, and the whole transformative concept built into the sacrament of baptism. John's cleverness in converting his steak through a baptismal rite reduces the whole concept of baptism to a silly conceit, and the Catholics' unwillingness to tolerate the tempting aromas of grilling steak suggests that their resolve to suffer a minor sacrifice is weak indeed.

At the same time, though, the joke reifies both the Lenten observance and the practice of baptism. The Catholic tradition of avoiding meat on Lenten Fridays is strengthened for Catholic readers by: 1) being reminded of it, 2) reading that an entire neighborhood is universally observing the fast, and 3) being treated to a joke that attaches a feeling of good humor to a less-than-delightful obligation, thereby rendering it more palatable. Baptism is reified by way of reaction against the folly of John christening his steak a fish: by offering an absurd use of the rite that clearly abuses its sacred intents, the joke forces the reader to ponder the essential theological basis for baptism and as a consequence reject the flippant use made of it in the joke. By making fun of baptism in a lighthearted way, the reader is offered the chance to consider his/her core beliefs about the rite and recommit to the essential ideology that supports it.

"Jehovah's witnesses don't celebrate Halloween. I guess they don't appreciate random people coming up to their doors" (9/29/13). On the one hand this joke is a cheap potshot leveled at the Jehovah's Witnesses ministerial practice of approaching people at

their homes to share their unique interpretation of scripture, and also makes light of that denomination's disdain for holidays. For most Christian readers, the joke provides a little laugh. For Jehovah's Witness readers, however, the joke might be carnivalesque: by witnessing their practice (and by extension their beliefs) mocked by those who do not subscribe to them, the faithful reader is reminded of the need for spreading the Jehovah's Witness doctrine in order to save others from their (ostensibly) mistaken doctrine. In other words: "If Christians are making fun of what we do, surely what we are doing is all the more important!" The practices and beliefs are reified through humor made at their expense.

A priest, a minister and a guru sat discussing the best positions for prayer, while a telephone repairman worked nearby. "Kneeling is definitely the best way to pray," the priest said.

"No," said the minister. "I get the best results standing with my hands outstretched to Heaven."

"You're both wrong," the guru said. "The most effective prayer position is lying down on the floor."

The repairman could contain himself no longer. "Hey, fellas," he interrupted.

"The best prayin' I ever did was when I was hangin' upside down from a telephone pole." (7/28/13)

This joke has some sport with religious rituals in pointing out that maybe the most effective prayers are those made in the time of greatest need, and at the same time (depending on the attitude of the reader) has some sport with prayer made in times of desperation rather than as a habit of regular observance. Either way it's a joke, either way prayer is being made fun of, and either way prayer is highlighted as an important activity for all religious believers. It also makes use of the common-folk, counter-heirarchical

perspective that is part of the carnivalesque by showing up the opinions of the learned and anointed with an answer that is more applicable to the contingencies of lived experience.

The joke posted on July 10 2013 makes fun of pastoring people towards a heavenly reward (and specifically of Billy Graham's pastoral ability), but in doing so points out the inherent mistake in judging the worth of religious standards of conviction via secular standards of knowing.

Reverend Billy Graham tells of a time early in his ministry when he arrived in a small town to preach a sermon. Wanting to mail a letter, he asked a young boy where the post office was. When the boy had told him, Dr. Graham thanked him and said, "If you'll come to the Baptist Church this evening, you can hear me telling everyone how to get to heaven."

The boy replied, "I don't think I'll be there... You don't even know your way to the post office."

For Christian readers the religious standards of “knowing” that pastors are held to have mastered is reified because the criticism of it implied by the joke is obviously not germane, and the joke uses the anti-heirarchical motif so much a part of the carnivalesque. Knowing how to get to the post office has nothing whatsoever to do with “knowing” how to get to Heaven.

On July 2 2013 God Jokes posted this brief joke:

A father was at the beach with his children when his four-year old son ran up to him, grabbed his hand, & led him to the shore, where a seagull lay dead in the sand. "Daddy, what happened to him?" the son asked. "He died & went to Heaven," the dad replied. The boy thought a moment & then said, "Did God throw him back down?"

The gag makes fun of the idea that the dead go to a special place called Heaven, and by extension that living creatures have a spiritual essence that transcends their corporeal bodies (it also suggests that God is the sort who would violently reject a seagull). All three ideas constitute sacrilegious violations of Christian theology. Nevertheless, this otherwise mild and simple joke reifies both philosophies by challenging them in an absurd fashion: it suggests Heaven is a bogus concept but uses a seagull rather than a human, and fails to separate the spiritual from the corporeal. Since Christian belief requires a different take on both points, the notion that this joke implies a valid criticism is negated and the theological premises of heaven and soul are left stronger for the unsuccessful challenge they endure.

Occasionally the God Jokes post is an embedded video hosted by YouTube, as was the case May 2 2013¹¹⁵. It's a short, low-quality video wherein God calls a young man twice on his iPhone, and twice the man declines to answer. The phone then becomes animate and manages to violently slingshot itself into the back of the man's head, whereupon he finally answers. Besides revealing that mild violence is acceptable to God Jokes at least when employed to a missionary purpose, the video provides an example of parabolic carnival. While it is absurd to imagine 1) God using a telephone line to contact someone, and 2) God using a phone to violently assault that someone, the video illustrates the importance of listening for God's "call" to such extreme degree that a Christian cannot help but be reminded of ideological teachings concerning both the supernatural and the benevolent natures of God.

Sometimes humor is used to deliver a clear and simple message in parabolic, yet ludic (and irreverent) fashion:

¹¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saKAS-iA13I>

A burglar broke into a house one night. He shined his flashlight around, looking for valuables when a voice in the dark said: "Jesus knows you're here."

He nearly jumped out of his skin, clicked his flashlight off, and froze. When he heard nothing more, he shook his head and continued.

Just as he pulled the stereo out so he could disconnect the wires, clear as a bell he heard "Jesus is watching you."

Startled, he shined his light around frantically, looking for the source of the voice.

Finally, in the corner of the room, his flashlight beam came to rest on a parrot.

"Did you say that?" he hissed at the parrot.

'Yes', the parrot confessed, then squawked: "I'm just trying to warn you that he's watching you."

The burglar relaxed. "Warn me, huh? Who in the world are you?"

"Moses", replied the bird.

"Moses?" the burglar laughed. "What kind of people would name a bird Moses?"

"The kind of people who would name a Rottweiler Jesus." (4/28/13)

The message of the joke is clear: Jesus is watching you. It's a warning Christians hear again and again, and though the joke makes light use of the phrase it is nevertheless delivered again to Christian readers. Being funny rather than didactic, it has the potential to reinforce this particular teaching by being repeated in a way that might be more memorable to particular readers.

The narrative joke posted July 24 2013 is a strong satire that acts as a cautionary tale against making so much of denominational differences that compassion is left by the wayside:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said,

"Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I

said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too!"

What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

"Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

By carrying denominational precision to such an absurd extreme while still being funny (in a dark sort of way...), without being didactic the joke implies a compassionate argument consistent with Christian principles of love and mercy: embrace your brothers and sisters regardless of your differences. Certainly the joke makes fun of Christians and their many schisms, but it also reifies the bonds that bind them together.

The joke posted on April 25 2013 is at the expense of Christian Science, and works as a ludic parable by carrying their ideology about illness to such an extreme that it serves that community by making its real-world application seem more reasonable by comparison:

A leader in a Christian Science church was talking to a member of his congregation: "And how is your husband today?" "I'm afraid he's very ill." "No, no," corrected the leader, "You really shouldn't say that - you should say that he's under the impression that he's very ill ." The woman nods in agreement, "Yes, I'll remember next time." A few weeks later the leader saw the woman again. "And how is your husband at the moment?" "Well", she replied, "he's under the impression that he's dead!"

As at LarkNews, jokes at the expense of church pastors are common at God Jokes. Pastors are boring, they're goof-offs, they have a hard time keeping their congregation coming to church every Sunday. Whatever the setup these jokes all function using the mode of counter-heirarchy in the same way: they serve to humble, and so to humanize, the pastor and remind church-goers that he is just another man and not to be feared. Maybe, just maybe, he could even be a friend (if you went to church...).

One minister says that it doesn't bother him at all if his members look at their watches during his sermons. It does affect him, however, when someone not only looks at his watch, but also holds it up to his ear to see if it's still running.

(5/15/13)

Also:

Father Norton wakes up to a beautiful, sunny Sunday morning and decides he just has to play golf. He pretends he's sick and convinces the associate pastor to say mass for him that day, then heads out of town to a golf course about 50 miles away so he won't run into anyone from his parish. On the first tee he sees he has the entire course to himself: Everyone else is in church!

Watching from heaven, Saint Peter turns to the Lord and asks, "are you going to let him get away with this?"

Just then Father Norton hits the ball. It heads straight for the pin, drops just short of it, rolls up, and falls into the hole - a 420 yard hole in one!

Astonished, Saint Peter looks at the Lord and asks, "Why in Heaven did you let him do that?"

The Lord smiles and replies, "Who's he going to tell?" (6/29/13)

Congregations are also a frequent subject of humor on the God Jokes page, more so than individual believers are. The jokes serve the same purpose as those on pastors: to remind Christians that they are just as venal and foolish as anyone else, thence to foster both a sense of individual humility and a sense of commonality with one's fellow

believers. Humility reinforces the conviction that a believer needs church in order to improve and “be saved”; commonality reinforces the assumption that *these* are the people one wants to accompany on one’s spiritual journey.

At the FINAL ASSEMBLY B-I-B-L-E Study I told everyone that "Next week I plan to teach about the sin of lying". To help you understand my study, I want you all to read Acts Chapter 29." The following Sunday, as I prepared to deliver my study, I asked for a show of hands. I wanted to know how many had read Acts 29. Every hand went up. I smiled and said: "Acts has only 28 chapters. I will now proceed with my study on the sin of lying." (5/13/13)

Similarly:

One day God was looking down at Earth and saw all of the rascally behavior that was going on. So he called an angel and sent him to Earth for a time.

When he returned, he told God: Yes, it is bad on Earth; 95% are misbehaving and only 5% are not.

God was not pleased. So He decided to e-mail the 5% who were good, because He wanted to encourage them and to give them a little something to help them keep going.

Do you know what the e-mail said ?

Well, just wondering - I didn't get one either. (10/8/13)

Several of the jokes on individuals have to do with money. Wealth is something of a sore point in the Christian community: Jesus extolled the virtues of poverty, but many American Christians seem more interested in good comfort¹¹⁶. The following joke addressed both sides of that tension:

At a Wednesday evening church meeting a very wealthy man rose to give his testimony.

¹¹⁶ “Prosperity theology” (also called “prosperity gospel” or “prosperity doctrine”) explicitly teaches that wealth is a reflection of virtue, that financial blessing is the will of God for Christians and that faith will increase material wealth. It is both a very popular and a very controversial doctrine.

"I'm a millionaire," he said, "and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I can still remember the turning point in my faith, like it was yesterday: I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work.

I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God's work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar to God.

I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today."

As he finished it was clear that everyone had been moved by this man's story.

But, as he took his seat, a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over and said: "Wonderful story! I dare you to do it again!"

What this joke offers is something of an inoculation element. By making light of accumulating wealth in a cute and funny way rather than by explicit scolding, it may serve to help insulate well-off Christian readers from any criticism that their wealth contradicts a foundational teaching of Christ. By making a joke of the issue, prosperous Christians are enabled to laugh off such criticisms or indeed any feelings of guilt they might harbor internally.

For Christians, Not About Christians

Some jokes posted on the God Jokes page work at the very edges of the type of humor that has been featured thus far in this dissertation because they are jokes that involve Christianity but do not feature punch lines at the expense of Christianity. Their function and modality is the same, in that they use religion as their foil and work to ultimately reify an element of Christian practice or culture. However, the butt is not directly about that Christian element. While this is still humor that supports the Christian perspective and, and they push the softer Going Far Enough boundary of the religious humor format.

There was a little old lady, who every morning stepped onto her front porch, raised her arms to the sky, and shouted: "PRAISE THE LORD!"

One day an atheist moved into the house next door. He became irritated at the little old lady.

Every morning he'd step onto his front porch after her and yell: "THERE IS NO LORD!"

Time passed with the two of them carrying on this way every day.

One morning, in the middle of winter, the little old lady stepped onto her front porch and shouted: "PRAISE THE LORD! Please Lord, I have no food and I am starving, provide for me, oh Lord!"

The next morning she stepped onto her porch and there were two huge bags of groceries sitting there.

"PRAISE THE LORD!" she cried out. "HE HAS PROVIDED GROCERIES FOR ME!"

The atheist neighbor jumped out of the hedges and shouted: "THERE IS NO LORD. I BOUGHT THOSE GROCERIES!!"

The little old lady threw her arms into the air and shouted: "PRAISE THE LORD! HE HAS PROVIDED ME WITH GROCERIES AND MADE THE DEVIL PAY FOR THEM! (8/17/13)

This joke *is* funny, and *does* use Christian practice (i.e. prayer) as an essential device within the joke, and *does* reify Christian beliefs (e.g. the power of prayer, the benevolence of God, Christian victory over atheism). The reason is that the joke is not made at the *expense* of Christians or Christianity; the joke is on the atheist who is made to look like an instrument of divine will (and in the process is shown to be a decent sort of fellow in spite of himself).

Little Logan and his family were having Sunday dinner at his Grandmother's house. Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. When little Logan received his plate, he started eating right away.

"Logan, wait until we say our prayer," his mother reminded him.

"I don't have to," the little boy replied.

"Of course you do," his mother insisted, "we say a prayer before eating at our house."

"That's at our house," Logan explained, "but this is Grandma's house and she knows how to cook. (6/12/13)

The above is another example of the same sort of humor. In truth the butt of the joke is Mom's cooking and not Christian practice; however, the habit of prayer is still reified because any Christian who reads this will reflect that the primary purpose of the prayer before meals is not to ask that He protect us from the food but rather to thank Him for providing it; wee Logan is a funny character, but surely God is to be praised regardless of the cook's skill in the kitchen. The function of the joke is serves to reify the practice of regular prayer. However, the form is somewhat altered: while elements of the joke implicitly relate to Christianity, the punch line is not made at any of those elements' expense.

On the God Jokes page these jokes generally come in three types. The first of these make simple use of puns. Some of these are just clever use of scripture characters, apropos of nothing: *"Rebekah was the first woman to smoke a cigarette. Genesis 24:64: 'And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel'"* (9/27/13). Others are simple pastoral messages, like the sign on the Boyette Springs Church of God reading: *"Give God What's Right, Not What's Left"* (12/5/13). Others are longer narratives carrying a parabolic element, like this one that suggests salvation does not require sophisticated intelligence or typical answers:

When Forest Gump died, he stood in front of St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, "Welcome, Forest. We've heard a lot about you." He continued,

"Unfortunately, it's getting pretty crowded up here and we find that we now have to give people an entrance examination before we let them in."

"Okay," said Forest. "I hope it's not too hard. I've already been through a test. My momma used to say, 'Life is like a final exam. It's hard.'"

"Yes, Forest, I know. But this test is only three questions. Here they are."

1) Which two days of the week begin with the letter 'T'?"

2) How many seconds are in a year?"

3) What is God's first name?"

"Well, sir," said Forest, "The first one is easy. Which two days of the week begin with the letter 'T'? Today and Tomorrow."

St. Peter looked surprised and said, "Well, that wasn't the answer I was looking for, but you have a point. I give you credit for that answer."

"The next question," said Forest, "How many seconds are in a year? Twelve."

"Twelve?" said St. Peter, surprised and confused.

"Yes, sir. January 2nd, February 2nd, March 2nd ..."

St. Peter interrupted him. "I see what you mean. I'll have to give you credit for that one, too."

"And the last question," said Forest, "What is God's first name? It's Andy."

"Andy?" said St. Peter, in shock. "How did you come up with 'Andy'?"

"I learned it in church. We used to sing about it." Forest broke into song, "Andy walks with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am His own."

St. Peter opened the gate to heaven and said, "Run, Forest, Run!" (11/20/13)

The second variety prevalent on the God Jokes page, similar to the first, involve smart plays-on-words. Many make no comment on Christianity at all, like this one where a child unintentionally embarrasses her mother:

A certain little girl, when asked her name, would reply:

"I'm Mr. Sugarbrown's daughter."

Her mother told her this was wrong, she must say: "I'm Jane Sugarbrown."

The Pastor spoke to her in Sunday School, and said:

"Aren't you Mr. Sugarbrown's daughter?"

She replied: "I thought I was, but Mother says I'm not." (6/30/13)

Others direct their humor to those outside of the faith, as in: *"Can atheists get insurance for acts of God?"* (6/26/13). Many of them make light of children's misunderstandings when first being taught about religion:

"Pastor Walters," announced little Johnny, "there's somethin' I can't figure out."

"What's that Johnny?" asked Pastor Walters.

"Well accordin' to the Bible, the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea, right?"

"Right."

"An' the Children of Israel beat up the Philistines, right?"

"Er--right."

"An' the Children of Israel built the Temple, right?"

"Again you're right."

"An' the Children of Israel fought the 'Gyptians, an' the Children of Israel fought the Romans, an' the Children of Israel wuz always doin' somethin' important, right?"

"All that is right, too," agreed Pastor Walters. "So what's your question?"

"What I wanna know is this," demanded Johnny. "What was all the grown-ups doin'?" (7/19/13)

The third type isn't so much a unique category as it's "everything else". Blonde jokes, jokes on scientists, baseball jokes, jokes on a variety of subjects whose only commonality is that they include some motif having something to do with Christianity. On the God Jokes page it's the category that is most likely to feature "mean" or "cutting" humor, a clue that the administrator is not so much against that sort of thing generally as s/he is against having it leveled against Christianity or Christians. For instance the following joke is rough on lawyers, and not much kinder to garbage collectors:

Recently a teacher, a garbage collector, and a lawyer wound up together at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter informed them that in order to get into Heaven, they would each have to answer one question.

St. Peter addressed the teacher and asked, "What was the name of the ship that crashed into the iceberg? They just made a movie about it." The teacher answered quickly, "That would be the Titanic." St. Peter let him through the gate.

*St. Peter turned to the garbage man and, figuring Heaven didn't *really* need all the odors that this guy would bring with him, decided to make the question a little harder: "How many people died on the ship?" Fortunately for him, the trash man had just seen the movie. "1,228," he answered. "That's right! You may enter."*

St. Peter turned to the lawyer. "Name them." (12/12/13)

Misogynistic stereotypes, evidently, also have their place on the God Jokes page, even if they don't entirely makes sense:

I have found biblical truth that men will get to heaven before women. 30 minutes before, to be exact. This is inarguable biblical proof:

Revelation 8:1 "When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." (8/4/13)

The following joke at the expense¹¹⁷ of science does manage to illustrate a fundamentalist Christian ideology:

A scientist was arguing with God one day that he too could create life.

God replied: "I am the Lord God creator of all things." He alone could create life and would demonstrate it for the scientist.

God took a handful of dirt and breathed on it, creating life as He had done in the beginning.

The scientist said he too could create life and began to pick up a handful of dirt.

Just then God said: "NO! - get your own dirt!" (10/7/13)

¹¹⁷ Although the fact that this scientist is chatting with God suggests that (in the context of a Christian website) he must be a Christian as well.

Scatological jokes are acceptable to a Christian audience, according to God Jokes, just as long as they don't point the scat at Christians:

An atheist seated next to a little girl on an airplane turned to her and said, "Do you want to talk? Flights go quicker if you strike up a conversation with your fellow passenger."

The little girl, who had just started to read her book, replied to the total stranger: "What would you want to talk about?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the atheist. "How about why there is no God, or no Heaven or Hell, or no life after death?" as he smiled smugly.

"Okay," she said. "Those could be interesting topics but let me ask you a question first. A horse, a cow, and a deer all eat the same stuff - grass. Yet a deer excretes little pellets, while a cow turns out a flat patty, but a horse produces clumps. Why do you suppose that is?"

The atheist, visibly surprised by the little girl's intelligence, thinks about it and says: "Hmmm, I have no idea."

To which the little girl replies, "Do you really feel qualified to discuss God, Heaven and Hell, or life after death, when you don't know crap?" (5/7/13)

While Jews have been among the favorite targets of Christians since before Constantine painted crosses on his shields, contemporary American Christians (especially evangelicals, consistent with their resolute support for the State of Israel) is usually more circumspect about picking on the Jewish community. The following is an exception:

A Jewish businessman in Chicago sent his son to Israel for a year to absorb the culture. When the son returned, he said: "Papa, I had a great time in Israel. By the way, I converted to Christianity."

"Oy vey," said the father, "What have I done!"

He took his problem to his best friend. "Ike," he said, "I sent my son to Israel, and he came home a Christian. What can I do?"

"Funny you should ask," said Ike. "I, too, sent my son to Israel, and he also came

home a Christian. Perhaps we should go see the Rabbi."

They explained their problem to the Rabbi.

"Funny you should ask," said the rabbi. "I, too sent my son to Israel, and he also came home a Christian. What is happening to our young people?"

They prayed, telling the Lord about their sons.

As they finished their prayer a voice came from the heavens: "Funny you should ask," said the voice, "I, too, sent my son to Israel..." (9/23/13)

The raciest joke featured on the God Jokes page thus far is the one posted on October 25 2013, and features not only Catholics, Jews, and a “nun” but cross-dressing, male-on-male kissing, and an unusual (?) sexual fantasy:

A cabbie picks up a nun. She gets into the cab, and the cab driver won't stop staring at her. She asks him why is he staring and he replies, "I have a question to ask you but I don't want to offend you."

She answers, "My dear son, you cannot offend me. When you're as old as I am and have been a nun as long as I have, you get a chance to see and hear just about everything. I'm sure that there's nothing you could say or ask that I would find offensive."

"Well, I've always had a fantasy to have a nun kiss me."

She responds, "Well, let's see what we can do about that: #1, you have to be single and #2, you must be Catholic."

The cab driver is very excited and says, "Yes, I am single and I'm Catholic too!"

"OK" the nun says "Pull into the next alley."

He does and the nun fulfills his fantasy with a kiss that would make a hooker blush. But when they get back on the road, the cab driver starts crying.

"My dear child", said the nun, "Why are you crying?"

"Forgive me sister, but I have sinned. I lied, I must confess: I'm married and I'm Jewish."

The nun says, "That's OK, my name is Kevin and I'm on my way to a Halloween party."

The joke is transgressive and sacrilegious (at the very least for doctrinally committed Catholics) in positing a man posing as a nun, a man kissing another man, a (married!) man wanting to kiss a nun, and a Jew posing as a Christian in order to fulfill a sexual fantasy. Perhaps it's too funny to be offensive, but offense is not a required condition of the carnivalesque. It serves it's constructive purpose by reminding Christian readers that straying outside the bounds of morality as prescribed by the church can lead to unexpected, and perhaps unwanted, consequences.

God Jokes at the Carnival

Occasionally God Jokes does run a feature that I think does qualify as carnivalesque religious humor. They are few and far between, and still less "sharp" than many of the other such examples featured elsewhere in this study, and that they are not so very different from the other jokes God Jokes runs demonstrates how closely this kind of online religious humor hews to many of the elements Bakhtin and later scholars have identified as essential.

"The Top 15 Biblical Ways to Get a Wife", posted on 6/14/13, is one of the most provocative and challenging "jokes" to appear on the God Jokes page. It uses scriptural paraphrase to relentlessly bombard the reader with blatant and, in some cases brutal, male chauvinism:

Find an attractive prisoner of war, bring her home, shave her head, trim her nails, and give her new clothes. Then she's yours. - (Deut 21:11-13).

Find a prostitute and marry her. - (Hosea 1:1-3).

Find a man with seven daughters, and impress him by watering his flock. - Moses (Ex 2:16-21).

Purchase a piece of property, and get a woman as part of the deal. - Boaz (Ruth 4:5-10).

Go to a party and hide. When the women come out to dance, grab one and carry her off to be your wife. - Benjaminites (Jud 21:19-25).

Have God create a wife for you while you sleep. Note: this will cost you.-Adam (Gen 2:19-24).

Agree to work seven years in exchange for a woman's hand in marriage. Get tricked into marrying the wrong woman. Then work another seven years for the woman you wanted to marry in the first place. That's right. Fourteen years of toil for a wife. - Jacob (Gen 29:15-30).

Cut 200 foreskins off of your future father-in-law's enemies and get his daughter for a wife -David (I Samuel 18:27).

Even if no one is out there, just wander around a bit and you'll definitely find someone. (It's all relative, of course.) - Cain (Gen 4:16-17).

Become the emperor of a huge nation and hold a beauty contest. - Xerxes or Ahasuerus (Esther 2:3-4).

When you see someone you like, go home and tell your parents, I have seen a ... woman; now get her for me. If your parents question your decision, simply say, Get her for me. She's the one for me. - Samson (Judges 14:1-3).

Kill any husband and take HIS wife (Prepare to lose four sons, though).-David (2 Samuel 11).

Wait for your brother to die. Take his widow. (It's not just a good idea; it's the law.) - Onana and Boaz (Deuteronomy or Leviticus, example in Ruth).

*Don't be so picky. Make up for quality with quantity. - Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-3).
A wife?...NOT! - Paul (1 Cor 7:32-35).*

The list is ludicrous, makes a sacrilege of the Biblical scripture so important to Christians, and it is transgressive in that it advocates mating strategies that most contemporary Americans would find barbaric. But the paraphrasing is key: by condensing these stories with intentionally flippant caricature they are made to seem ridiculous and thence are potentially rendered harmless. For those who might otherwise question whether the Bible is really so full of good advice as Christianity advertises, rendering these old stories

(indeed, all but one is from the Old Testament) comedic takes away their potential offensiveness by rendering them laughable. It can also be interpreted as something of a double-layered carnivalesque strategy: that which is made fun of directly (i.e. the selected Bible stories) are treated by the ludic in a way that does *not* redeem them; however, by doing so the Bible as a whole is insulated from those stories and thereby reified.

Summary

The God Jokes page on Facebook is a site of pro-Christian Christian humor that features jokes that mostly feature laughter for laughter's sake. Its ludic content is the mildest and least potentially offensive featured in this study, and so provides some insight into how to most gently Go Far Enough. Much of the humor works to promote humility and acceptance, though certain Christian practices such as prayer, inter-denominational tolerance (ecumenism), pastoral validity, and baptism are reified specifically. Concerning more provocative elements, God Jokes postings do occasionally feature violence, misogyny, deceit, and irreverence concerning Biblical characters. As at LarkNews and GodTube, the butt of the joke is never God Himself or the essential theology that grounds Christianity as a religion.

“Mean” or “cutting” jokes, as well as sexually racy humor, are reserved for jokes whose butt is not the Christian element featured in the joke and use humor as an alternative way to address matters of faith. Topics raised in this vein are that some folks will have a hard time getting into heaven because of their occupation; science; scatological references; Jews; cross-dressing; male-on-male sexual contact; and sexual fantasy.

Some jokes posted on the God Jokes page work at the edges of Christian humor: their function and modality is the same, in that they use religion as their foil and work to ultimately reify an element of Christian practice or culture; however, the butt of the joke does not directly reference the Christian element.

The content of the God Jokes page demonstrates, as does the content hosted on GodTube and featured at LarkNews, that not all pro-Christian Christian humor has to be strictly carnivalesque in order for it to both be funny and serve as a constructive mode of observing and engaging with Christianity. It either lacks the form (making fun of that which it means to reify) or the effect (reifying that which is mocked) that Bakhtin described. Even jokes centered on Christianity, which has traditionally left little room for humor and about which even today many believers feel humor is inappropriate, can sometimes just be jokes: funny just for the sake of a little mirth or jocular pleasure.

However, every example of pro-Christian humor that takes as its subject some aspect of Christian culture, practice, or belief contributes to enlarging room for the carnivalesque effect. By insinuating humor into the Christian conversation, however innocuously, these jokes conditions audiences to accept the notion that Christian humor can be safe, constructive, and without casualty.

The religious and the ludic can be used together in an indirect, layered fashion. By making unredeemed fun of a portion of an important element of Christianity (e.g. the Bible), objectionable or inconvenient parts of that element are easily dismissed as comical without sacrificing the validity of the remainder. In this way, humor can be used to reify the important element of Christianity that has been indirectly addressed.

Christian humor can also function as an inoculation tactic. Through joking about some element of Christian practice, belief, or culture, criticism of that element is diffused and the potential of using such criticism to challenge the validity of that element is reduced. This can be both external, when the element (or person who participates in or embodies it) is inoculated against criticism from without, or internal, when an individual who might harbor feelings of doubt or guilt is inoculated against his or her own inconvenient feelings.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions

Thorough examination of the websites LarkNews.com, GotTube.com, and the Christian Humor/God Jokes page at Facebook.com demonstrates that pro-Christian humor that features Christian beliefs, practices, ideologies, culture, and practitioners as that humor's primary topic is a significant, ongoing phenomenon. It is a genre that includes textual, audio/visual, and cartoon media, and is featured in stand-alone, video hosting, and social media sites. These case studies provide a snapshot that demonstrates the carnivalesque potential of the digital sphere, and showcase some of the strategies used by Christian groups to negotiate a balance between the affirming potential of the ludic and the imperative to protect ideological integrity.

These sites provide examples of how the rise of the internet has dramatically expanded the terrain of religious expression, communication, and cultural consumption, and how its low entry costs and broad reach have created significant potential openings for smaller or more dispersed religious communities, as well as laypeople within larger denominations. Facilitated by the technical affordances that put publishing within easy

reach, these sites provide laypeople opportunity to produce their own commentary on their religious traditions without the sanction of clerics or ecclesiastical headquarters. They contribute to the richness of Christian discussion by giving voice to an alternative perspective on religious practices and church-influenced lifestyles. They celebrate those practices and lifestyle choices, in comedic but still genuine fashion, by showing how they can be ridiculous and at the same time normative, relateable, and still “religious”.

Each of these sites constitutes a unique and self-selected religious community whose membership is as fluid as user whimsy dictates. Each site simultaneously contributes to both individually established spheres of observance as well as the Christian community writ large. As such, they contribute towards proving Chris Helland’s (2007) conviction that the incorporation of the digital into religious practice constitutes a slowly developing, fundamental change in how the faith is observed. That so many participate in what is (for most) a new way of engaging their faith shows that, slowly but steadily, Christian humor is becoming an integral part of the Christian conversation, online and off.

Vehement resistance and dissent about the value, appropriateness, and motivations for Christian humor demonstrate that this material is provocative and that acceptance of it is a process far from complete. The digital provides an environment of permission in which to explore, consider, and debate Christian humor without the commitment and potential risks of corporeal involvement. Believers can test their tolerance with a fair degree of anonymity since engagement with the internet is akin to a spiritual exercise to begin with. It is indeed a “second space” where bodies and everything associated with one’s corporeal engagement with others can be shed, to

whatever degree suits the user, in order to experience alternate modes of engagement with religious ideas and spiritual expression.

Purveyors of Christian comedy believe their sites constitute ministries that make positive contributions to Christianity. The laughter they inspire is healthy in itself, provides an alternative to secular entertainment often perceived as inconsistent with Christian morality, and provides lessons that can enhance believer's engagement with their faith and with their deity.

Navigating the Limits

Christian comedy uses humor at the expense of that which it means to reify in the life of the individual or community that witnesses it. Successful deployment usually requires three elements: it has to be funny; it must have the effect of reifying that which is made fun of; and the text must adhere within the twin limits of Going Far Enough towards the ludic to engage and amuse the reader and avoiding Going Too Far so as to offend and thereby cause the reader to not appreciate its reifying qualities. Where those limits fall is to some degree a negotiation between the producer and the consumer of the content, but this study has determined there is one firm rule.

The most consistent first rule for those who would use humor towards contributing positively to Christian dialogue is that the joke never be at the expense of the foundational principles of Christianity: i.e. that God exists as a personal entity; that Jesus is His son in a singular yet triune Godhead; that He is omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and eternal; and that Christianity is the one valid and true religion. This rule is true across all three sites of the study and these principle beliefs held as something of a *raison d'être* by all three. This rule might seem unsurprising considering that these are self-identified

Christian websites and so (presumably) are loathe to undercut their own ideological bases, but neither Hyers nor Bakhtin, nor any other theorist, implies any such intrinsic limits in how it uses humor to reify a system of belief.

Pro-Christian humor never mocks God or Christianity explicitly, and even in those rare cases when it might seem otherwise the jokes say more about the foolishness of believers than it implicates God for being foolish Himself. It is never God who is imperfect, or the theology of Christianity that is flawed: it is the people that follow Him and the modes of that observance that are shown deserving of ridicule.

Although Joel Kilpatrick of LarkNews is the only producer to state it explicitly, there is some level of implicit acknowledgement across all the examples of Christian humor explicated in this study that the notion of religious faith lends itself to being critiqued as a silly enterprise. Whether the joke be centered on the efficacy of prayer or the qualifications to enter Heaven or how to wave one's hands during worship, there is an underlying, winking admission that there is a certain propositional absurdity to religious observance and (even more so) to religious culture. Even as Christians hold (and comics reify) their beliefs as sacrosanct, Christian comedy creates some room and some outlet for acknowledging that belief in a supernatural Being who created all things, and presides over not only this existence but also a wondrous supernatural dimension called Heaven, is in some sense an intrinsically comic position.

The primary Christian humor practice in the way of Going Far Enough is to consistently challenge any notion that Christians are any "better" than anyone else, and to instead explicitly argue that they are just as venal and silly and flawed as non-Christians. They make selfish decisions, they harbor misguided attitudes, they're selfish and bitter

and frequently just plain dumb. The most used strategy for poking fun is to tell Christians that they are sinners, that they are ridiculous, and therefore they are funny.

While the venalities and foibles of Christian people are the most common subjects of Christian humor, the material featured on all three sites indicates that care has been taken in making sure that Christians are loved and cared for even as they are being mocked. Not only are their essential ideologies never made fun of, but this rule is also born out by the fact that actual living persons are not the subject of the jokes. The LarkNews articles featuring Rick Warren are the only exceptions, and even then the kidding is not at the expense of his character or pastoral teaching but instead makes light fun of his signature “purpose-driven” phrase and its ubiquity in the contemporary evangelical conversation.

GodTube and God Jokes do frequently use Bible characters (even Jesus) in their comedy, however. Either they are the “straight man/woman” in a joke, or their flaws as reflected in scripture are given ludic treatment in order to illustrate some point about the failures of human character from which none are entirely exempt. Their sanctity is never questioned, though, and the Biblical accounts of their lives and whatever significance they contribute to Christian theology, Christian lore, or Christian culture is never given over to ludic treatment.

As far as what specific topics are most acceptable or most taboo the most universal rule in Christian humor is this: that which is internal to the faith, i.e. those topics that are already considered appropriate and polite and in keeping with Christian morality, are fair game; those topics which are generally not part of polite conversation within Christian communities and can create controversy relative to normative standards

of Christian propriety are rare and risky. Put another way, and consistent with the counterintuitive nature of the Christian humor strategy: it is generally ok to make fun of Christian culture and practice, but it is not ok to insinuate looser secular morality into the Christian sphere of conversation even in fun. This rule includes a crucial caveat: those elements of Christian practice and culture which potentially reflect reverence for God, most especially worship music, are given the ludic treatment at significant risk of causing offense.

Prayer, baptism, going to church, being a pastor, ushers, Sunday school, vacation Bible school, missionary work, tithing and the collection basket, being a pastor's wife or child, going to Heaven, waving hands and banners, Bible study, small groups, inter-denominational disagreement, proselytizing, home-schooling, CCM¹¹⁸, Bible language, *et cetera ad nauseam*: these are the kinds of topics that Christians include as part of their religious life, and for the most part seem comfortable with suffering a joke or two over. Vulgarity, sex, homosexuality, cruelty, meanness, body humor, anger, cursing and "foul" language, the occult, rape, name-calling; these are the kinds of topics that this humor shies away from almost completely.

There are exceptions to the latter list, of course, but their rarity proves the rule: out of roughly 700 jokes examined there were perhaps two that toyed with sexuality (and one of those was external to the three sites studied); one that mentioned the occult (but even then it never repeated any occult message); and one that featured name-calling (as a mistake quickly rectified) and was also the only joke featuring body humor.

Music is a touchy topic for Christian humorists. While most of those who respond to worship lyrics being put to popular music appreciate it as good fun, some are vehement

¹¹⁸ CCM = Christian Contemporary Music

in their feeling that it is disrespectful to God and to Christian tradition. As a rule, however, attempts to use popular music to tell Bible stories are acceptable to nearly everyone.

In this sample, race has been handled as a topic of humor from two quite divergent perspectives. LarkNews explicitly recognizes that the evangelical community is often tone-deaf to the racial segregation of the larger Christian community and made fun of whites' sometimes un-evolved ideas of what constitutes diversity. Conversely, the one GodTube video featuring a black man used him as a menacing prop and implicitly reinforced whites' fear of blacks as frightening "others" whose best use is for sport and violence. Race is a rare topic in Christian humor, but these examples point out that the larger Christian community has some way to go if it means to apply the ostensibly Christian principle of loving embrace of those of every ethnic background.

Violence is also a rare topic, but it is acceptable to both Christian humorists and audiences as long as it is used to somehow reinforce a point of virtue (e.g. evangelizing) or make light of some other topic (e.g. interdenominational rivalry). This points to something of a conundrum within both historic and contemporary Christian culture: on the one hand God commanded his followers not to kill and Jesus enjoined the faithful to turn the other cheek; on the other hand the Bible and the history of Christian conquest are replete with violent episodes that were justified in the name of God and the church. Christian humor somehow manages to reinforce both perspectives, regardless of whatever cognitive dissonance those opposite views may stimulate.

The decisions of Christian humorists concerning what is both sufficient and appropriate are ultimately personal, and largely reflect their own sensibilities and

individual motivations for producing comedy. Both of the men I interviewed are keen to avoid hurting people, and both proceed from their love for the Christian community. Both run their material by their families first, but are their own ultimate arbiters of what is appropriate. Based on their testimony as well as the ideologies reflected in the GodTube and God Jokes “about” statements, Christian humorists feel confident that what they produce is healthy and “right” as long as they proceed from genuine respect and affection for God and the church.

Reaction

The Christian community’s reaction to comedy made at their own expense is largely positive, and there is clearly a robust audience for ludic engagement with the faith. Judging by this genre’s growth within the last dozen years, it seems more and more Christians have come to trust in humorous treatment of their faith and their practices. They increasingly think it’s valid, that it’s constructive, that it’s innocent fun, and they have become accustomed to the idea of being made fun of with no consequential loss of self-regard in their religious conviction.

However, the passion reflected in both positive and negative remarks reveals a lively debate among Christians about the appropriateness of humor when it is applied to matters of “church”, writ broadly, and largely seems to be a conflict between whether religion should only be addressed with a posture of sanctity or whether to sometimes indulge more joyous and lighthearted, even somewhat sacrilegious, impulses. Some practitioners seem to strongly feel that attaching humor to any aspect of observance presents a challenge to the notion that God is to be considered with reverence, and that any comedic activity touching on Christian observance compromises that priority. Others

seem to feel comfortable that comedy leveled at Christian practice can be done appropriately, and that it effects a sense of humility that is healthy and increases the joy to be had in participating in the religion. Some Christians seem to instinctively understand the constructive nature of Christian comedy, and others are offended by the very idea of it. Comedy is partly about tension, and certainly there is tension between those who feel jokes made at Christian culture is healthy, and those who find it denigrating and offensive; between those who make damning comments, and those who feel judgmental criticism of it is unChristian. Some folks miss that this material is satire and treat it as if it is serious and literal material. The carnival is not for everybody.

Many arguments in support of Christian comedy, especially the work involving popular music, extoll its potential to attract (and retain) young people to the church. Those who don't like the comedy and rock 'n roll are just as eager to attract and retain young people, but prefer to maintain a higher sense of solemnity. This tension reveals something of a disconnect between wanting a solemn experience on the one hand, and wanting to present the widest possible appeal on the other. Clearly it doesn't work for everyone, but this tension is one of the issues that Christian humor means to resolve: by making fun of various aspects of church practice and church culture the appeal of Christianity as an ideology and a lifestyle element is made more palatable; at the same time, because the humor is NOT made at the expense of God or of the essential tenets of the faith those are left untarnished and sanctified, the core ideologies intact for to be solemnly revered.

How the Comedy Affirms

This study has revealed that there exist a number of mechanisms that mediate between the humor a joke makes from Christianity and the reification of Christianity that ultimately results. In Bakhtin's original theorization regarding the pre-Lenten celebrations known as Carnival, the mechanism was the realization by the people that their social world would devolve into chaos without the restraining, organizing, morality-enforcing functions of religion. While fear of societal chaos and immorality is indeed one motivation for participating in religion, and perhaps was once a motivation for producing Christian comedy, this fear is not one of the primary mediating factors within the Christian ludic mode in the present moment. It has been replaced by a host of factors that speak to both contemporary and historically consistent needs and concerns within the Christian community of faith.

The fostering of humility within individual participants in the Christian church is one of the most commonly used mediators between the joke and its positive effect. Whether the joke is on a pastor or a worship leader or a member of a congregation, carnivalesque and carnivalesque-like humor cuts everyone down to size equally. By being made fun of, not in a vicious way but rather with some degree of affection implied by the tone of the joke, individuals are reminded that all have the same stature before God, that all are ridiculous creatures given to dopey and venal behavior, that Christians are just as dumb as everyone else. Humility reinforces the conviction that a believer needs church in order to improve and be "saved"; commonality reinforces the assumption that these other Christians are just the people to accompany on the spiritual journey because their circumstances are so easy to identify with.

Christian humor's potential for fostering humility is entirely consistent with Hyers' (1969) conception of how believers render themselves comic figures by trying and failing to live up to a standard of morality and grace inspired by our conception of the Divine, and by the (potential) futility and arrogance of trying to influence the Divine through rites and prayers. The condition of the believer is intrinsically ridiculous, and humor's function to remind them of that fact aids in both embracing the truth of it and encouraging an appropriate posture of supplication in response. To be humbled before God is to be reminded of His greatness, a notion that is consistent with Christian belief and welcomed by Christians since they both want and need to believe that God is far greater than anything they can conceive of.

Christian humor can also serve as something of a mirror that allows believers to see themselves as they really are, a service that Joel Kilpatrick suggests is similar to that which a person's closest friends perform. For observant Christians, a joke at the expense of the faith is in some sense a joke at their own expense. Being made fun of in an honest but loving way facilitates some degree of introspection, a self-examination that may result in consciously shedding unwanted habits and attitudes and recommitting to others considered desirable. Some of those reinforced elements are inevitably attached to the Christian's faith and the portion of his culture inflected by Christianity; ergo, for that person Christianity is reinforced by a joke that made her reconsider her own commitments.

Another prevalent mechanism of the Christian ludic identified by this study is the parabolic, wherein the comedy acts as a modal vehicle carrying a corrective message that reifies some principle of Christian morality or appropriate practice of the faith by

ridiculing its opposite. These jokes act as parables, stories that illustrate through comedic example some behavior or attitude that indicates the subject has taken their religion to an unfortunate extreme or off in some inappropriate direction altogether. The comedic aspect of these parables serves two purposes: to soften the potential “blow” that the reader might feel upon realizing that s/he may be guilty of the same foolishness as the characters in the joke, and to illustrate the topic to such an absurd degree that the reader cannot help but see how “wrong” the behavior can potentially be. This function is consistent with the historical tradition of the “holy fool”, which in some cases served a pedagogical purpose by likewise demonstrating occasions of sin (Shouse & Fraley 2010; Heller & Volkova 2003).

Many of the comments GodTube users leave indicate that it is this parabolic function of Christian humor that most resonates with them, and several of the producers of Christian comedy indicate that providing a corrective message is indeed their intention. Joel Kilpatrick of LarkNews specifically indicated that crafting stories with a moral message are not his intent, but while I take his testimony at face value my analysis has shown that, nevertheless, the majority of LarkNews stories can easily be read as correctives that illustrate regrettable behaviors by highlighting how absurd they are.

The simplest mechanism bridging the Christian joke and the strengthening of Christianity is joy. Jokes and humor engender mirth and happiness; when those jokes are centered on one’s religious faith the happiness that results is attached to that faith in the mind of the witness. When X = “something related to Christianity” it works something like this: X is funny + funny things make me feel good → something funny about X makes me feel good. Additionally: I like X already + something funny about X makes me

feel good → I feel good about having X in my life. It's a reinforcement loop based on the easiest premise: people enjoy humor, and people enjoy elements in their life that engender humor.

For some Christians the mechanism of the ludic is the way it somehow softens tension between the secular and the sacred influences on his or her life. Many of the jokes featured in the three websites, especially GodTube and God Jokes, aren't so much about the religious element they feature as about some mundane aspect of secular life, like driving or bungee jumping or avocados. By using humor to intentionally interweave the secular and the sacred, each can be considered from the perspective of the other in a safe way that acknowledges both the "realness" and the exigencies of both. The humor provides a light tone that insulates these often-serious considerations from seeming unbearably "heavy", and also insulates them from the dogma and didacticism that other forums might insist upon employing. Humor provides a pleasant environment that makes holding onto religion in the face of secular pressures easier, and thereby abets the believers conviction that religion is worth holding onto.

Another mechanism is simple boosterism, for lack of a better term. As in the "VBS Addiction" story suggesting that vacation bible school is something kids really enjoy, and the "John Baptizing his Steak" narrative implying that a whole neighborhood is observing the Lenten fast, one function of many Christian humor jokes is to remind Christians that elements of their culture and practice are compelling and being participated in by a lot of fellow believers. It's an explicit form of the carnivalesque strategy that uses humor to blatantly state that X is something that one's fellow Christians

are doing a lot of, and by that statement intentionally reifies the commonality, and by extension the salience, of that practice.

Christian humor also works to reify Christianity for believers by providing cover and release for their own sense that there is something funny going on in relation to their religious practices and/or in how God interacts with his followers. Perhaps they sense, as Joel Kilpatrick does, that God seems to be “messaging” with their lives in a way they can only describe as funny, or maybe there are dogmas within Christianity writ large that they not only do not subscribe to but indeed find utterly ridiculous (e.g. the literalist take on the Genesis stories that has some Christians believing the Earth so young that dinosaurs co-existed with modern humans). These believers might feel that their sense of comedy in matters of the Christian faith indicates that there is something “wrong” with Christianity, or that there is something defective within themselves that renders their faith somehow inauthentic for the humor they attach to Christianity. By acknowledging the comedy to be found in Christian motifs, carnivalesque humor provides an outlet for these feelings and affirms that these people’s participation in the religion is not invalidated by their own humorous takes on it.

Related to this last is the “double-layer”, or perhaps I should have termed it “once-removed”, ludic mechanism I described in chapter seven. This technique also provides cover for those who find some portion(s) of Christian dogma or the foundational scriptures objectionable and not in keeping with the rest of the ideology that they include as part of their own personal Christianity. By rendering some dogma or teaching utterly ridiculous and laughable, and then not redeeming that topic in any way (as in the “How to get a Wife” example), the remainder of the source of that topic (be it Christianity as a

whole or just the Bible) can still be held as valid. It's a matter of not throwing out the baby with the bathwater, something like: "yes, there is some objectionable stuff in the Bible and some Christians espouse crazy ideas, but now that we more sensible types have made fun of it and rendered it ridiculous we can move on to appreciating the portions of scripture that are valuable and instructive for a contemporary congregation".

The final mechanism for explaining the link between making fun of Christianity and somehow thereby reifying it is inoculation. I only explicated it by one example in chapter six, but I suspect it is a more significant function of the carnivalesque than the one mention might suggest. It works this way: by submitting aspects of their beliefs, practices, and culture to humorous treatment and themselves laughing at those jokes, believers are blunting the power those jokes might have to mock and compromise elements of Christianity. In this way Christian humor is a defense mechanism that reifies Christianity by protecting its community from the taunts that might potentially be leveled at them from outside.

When Offense is Taken

I have made it clear that for Christian humor to be successful *as* Christian humor, carnivalesque or not, it has to avoid going so far as to merely offend the audience. When individuals find the joke in poor taste, they are angered rather than amused and the humorous aspect of the message is lost. I have documented numerous examples of Christians expressing terrific umbrage at jokes presented in two of the forums presented here.

However, for these people the offensive Christian humor may still result in a reifying effect on their personal Christianity. In what constitutes an additional and

perhaps important mechanism of reification as the result of Christian humor, the Christian commitment of those who are offended is also strengthened as they react to the humor by referring to their Christian principles. The reason they are offended is that some principle of their Christian faith has been mocked in a way they find unacceptable; by reflecting on why it is unacceptable, however lengthy or brief that reflection might be, their conviction that the principle they hold dear is sacred and holy is reified in active counterpoint to the offending comedy. Since they are not amused all the other mechanisms of the carnivalesque identified here are nullified for them, but nevertheless their Christianity has been strengthened and recommitted as a direct result of witnessing an example of comedic treatment of the faith.

Relationship of Comic Types

Most pro-Christian Christian humor is not carnivalesque, strictly speaking. Some are examples of Christian humor that *are* funny, and *do* use Christian practice, belief, or culture as an essential device within the joke, and *do* function to reify those elements of Christianity, but nevertheless are beyond the bleeding edge of qualifying as carnivalesque humor. One reason is that the joke is not made at the *expense* of Christians or Christianity; while they utilize Christian elements to make humor, those elements are not the butt of the joke. Additionally, even jokes centered on Christianity, which has traditionally left little room for humor and about which even today many believers feel humor is inappropriate, can sometimes just be jokes: funny just for the sake of being funny. A third group of reasons is that the humor does not include the elements of sacrilege, counter-hierarchy, and transgression, but instead carries some other function such as the parabolic, or inoculation.

However: in some sense every example of pro-Christian humor that takes as its subject some aspect of Christian culture, practice, or belief contributes to enlarging room for the carnivalesque effect. By insinuating humor into the Christian conversation, innocuously and without making the butt of the joke from the included Christian element, this non-carnavalesque humor conditions audiences to accept the notion that Christian humor can be safe, constructive, and without casualty.

Digital Religion

This study is in direct conversation with the issues implicit in marketing religion. Marketing is at its core a collection of persuasion strategies deployed to create favor for a product that leads to an allegiance action (a purchase, a vote, one's presence, etc.); just so, the carnivalesque use of self-critical humor is also a persuasion strategy meant to bolster allegiance. Many of the challenges that face those using Christian humor are the same as for anyone marketing their particular church or denominational ideology, and inform the decisions that go into carnivalesque postings. One of the vexing conundrums of religious marketing is the perceived need to use popular cultural motifs to attract new members versus the imperative to maintain enough separation from popular culture to preserve the religion's distinctiveness. Producers of Christian comedic material have to maintain a careful balance in order to satisfy the first condition without sacrificing the second, or risk the exercise becoming antithetical to their purpose.

As mediated points of religio/cultural expression, the three sites explicated here reflect the dialogic nature of American Christianity by engaging in a discussion that flows largely from a congregational perspective back towards the institutions that guard normative standards of religious practice. In so doing they help to *constitute* American

Christianity by actively contributing to how the faith is presented and interpreted, creating in part what Christianity *is* in the American cultural context, enlarging it by expansion into the sphere of the ludic. Through mediatization a comedic perspective becomes part of how readers can engage with spiritual practice and provides an alternative language for assimilating the various ideologies and motifs of Christianity so to be compatible with their own personal belief systems.

These three sites, indeed all pro-Christian Christian comedy sites, are direct manifestations of the progressivist trend in contemporary Christianity for how they facilitate a two-way exchange between the mundane and the spiritual, between the effort to elevate the spiritual self and the comedy that results when those efforts come up against the realities of our mundane, imperfect corporeal existence. Certainly what they do would not be possible without the more liberal approach to belief that characterizes progressivism, a liberality these sites in turn advance and tacitly advocate by nature of their activities and their participation in the American Christian discussion of what does or should constitute observant and thoughtful practice.

In some sense what the producers of these sites have done is to create examples of “religion as media”, or perhaps more accurately of “media as religion”. These sites are dedicated media endeavors meant to exist as independent sites of religious expression. They provide opportunity for visitors to express their faith through some combination of witnessing, posting, and commenting upon Christian humor, as well as opportunity to explore how and whether to expand their ideology and practice based upon the views and modalities those humorous examples present. At the same time, by presenting a stated or implied-by-example set of constraints (standards of language and metaphor, of civility, of

morality, and of course the ideologies implicit in Christianity) they regulate the degree of ludic latitude and establish their own normative envelopes within which those views and modalities “should” conform. Thus, they effectively establish themselves as sites of Christian practice, and as such help to define Christianity as a religion in the contemporary moment.

Effectively these sites has become something akin to “church”, where God is worshipped through speech and song and points of Christian ideology, theology, and culture are debated and disseminated; as such, they blur the line between the sacred and the profane. All of them (although poor God Jokes only by contributing to the success of Facebook) are also for-profit commercial enterprises that gather a particular demographic of users in order to serve them up to interested advertisers. By combining both sacred and non-sacred elements they are examples of progressive spirituality, wherein religious practitioners are unafraid to use profane spaces and modalities in an effort to proselytize and further the concerns of the sacred.

Qualification

That Christian humorists stop short of mocking God, or challenging the most basic theology distinguishing Christianity, however, requires something of a qualification if not an outright caveat. To some degree the carnival treatment of Christianity seems truncated by this fact, somehow weakened, perhaps enough to imagine that all the other humor leveled at Christian practices, beliefs, and cultural motifs is mere trifling and play rather than examples of “upending” that makes for a unique way of examining and considering the Christian faith.

I disagree. Christian humor does not require absolute abnegation of every element of the ideology that is being treated by the ludic, and most essentially means to leave that ideology intact when the comedy is over; it does not require that religion be entirely defaced and left with nothing on which to make a claim to sanctity or authority. It is important to remember that Rabelais also stopped short of disavowing God or completely discarding the church in his otherwise *really* bawdy and anti-heirarchical novel, and the theory that Bakhtin generated from it followed that lead. Indeed, there are really only two essential points that distinguish carnival as a theory: that humor is used to mock religion and/or power, and that those institutions are ultimately left not only intact but strengthened by that treatment. To abuse God or (notions of) His essential nature with ludic play might very possibly Go Too Far and make the full recovery of believers' sense of sanctity and reverence impossible.

The Second Space

This study has shown that the ludic indeed allows Christians “to enter a liminal realm of freedom and . . . create a space for critique that would otherwise not be possible in ‘normal’ society” (Bruner 2005). Consistent with this idea in both form and content, Christian humor in digital space encourages Christians to consider their beliefs, practices, and culture through an alternative system of evaluation. That evaluation reveals not only new perspectives on Christianity, but also that believers have the liberty to choose the perspective through which they understand their own choices in regards to observance. Through the ludic, Christians need understand their faith not only through a historically determined and formal frame propped up by an established ecclesiastical elite, but also can engage with more pedestrian, somewhat profane, perhaps more relatable ways of

thinking about religious belief and practice. This, in turn, allows them “to substitute alternative codes for those that may have previously dictated their actions and perspectives” (Danow 1991).

As a carnivalesque space, the digital sphere can become just the time outside time that Bakhtin described, “a second life of the people, who for a time enter the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (1984b). The language that congregants speak is altered, to allow a familiarity and profanity that is sometimes considered inappropriate in more traditional “church” spaces. Users of Christian comedy sites are free to take on altered identities that are potentially distinct from ways they present themselves in corporeal life, and can participate in cultural activities that potentially are entirely removed from their non-digital lives. Quite literally, Christian humor hosted by the digital can be, to whatever degree seems good to the particular user, a “second space” for a second life. The carnival spirit offers a liberation from “all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (1984b), and Bakhtin has been shown correct in the instance of pro-Christian humor when he suggested that the ludic liberates people “not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor” (Bakhtin 1984b).

The sites explicated here provide examples of how Christian humor positions Christians as insiders rather than as outsiders to traditional discourse, thus able to challenge the normative values of traditional modes of religious communication. Further, these sites use laughter to position individuals as *inside* of and *constitutive* of the structures of the Christian faith, and thence able to utilize the ludic to ultimately enhance

their connection to both social and dogmatic elements of the Christian tradition in America.

According to Bakhtin, carnival is the context in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish, and interact (1984a). I argue again that Christian humor creates situations where conventions are challenged or reversed and genuine dialog becomes possible, and Christians with divergent views are enabled to approach issues of the faith equipped with an alternative language that is both constructive and intrinsically joyful. Each individual voice only defines an individual perspective, but mediated within the digital realm each believer can use the ludic to exert some small, potentially significant influence upon all those participating in the American Christian dialog.

Appendix One

Variety of Topics at LarkNews.com

LarkNews features cover such a broad range of topics that it is a challenge to categorize them while still doing justice to the unique perspectives of individual stories. In order to illustrate the variety of topics treated in the articles I sampled, as well as their relative frequency, below is a list of fairly narrow categories and the percentage of stories that fall into each.

- Sample size (N) = 302 Article
- In order to minimize the number of categories while demonstrating content range, articles that strongly exhibited features from more than one category are counted as examples of two categories. No article is counted into more than two categories. Articles counted into two categories are equal to 11% of the sample.
- “Other” category is for topics found only once within sample.

Table 3.1 – LarkNews Topics

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Behavior/Quirks of Church Pastors	10.8%
Church Recruitment/Diversity/Member Retention	9.0%
Missionary/Sponsoring/Charitable Activities	7.2%
Church as Business for Profit	5.4%
Pastor Rick Warren ¹¹⁹ , <i>Purpose Driven Life</i>	5.4%
Behavior/Quirks of church Staff	4.5%
Sex, Intimacy	3.6%
Scriptural interpretation/Application	3.6%
Behavior/Training of Pastor’s Wives	3.6%
Special Church for [*.*] (e.g. Dwarfs, Ponytailed Men, Jerks)	2.7%
Prophecy, Glossolalia	2.7%
Names of Ministry Groups	2.7%
Inter-Denominational Rivalry	2.7%
Christian Colleges / Student Partying	2.7%

¹¹⁹ Rick Warren is the pastor of evangelical mega-church Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, and the author of a popular Christian motivational book called *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002). Warren has used LarkNews stories in sermons over the years and given quotes to the media about the site (Kilpatrick 2012).

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Christian Music	2.7%
Rapture/Millennialism	2.7%
Marriage	2.7%
Church Drama Programs	2.7%
Morality	1.8%
Spiritual Ecstasy	1.8%
Vacation Bible School	1.8%
Bibleman (Evangelical Superhero Character)	1.8%
Fear of/Resistance to Secular Culture	1.8%
Ministry via Clowns, Puppets, Mimes	1.8%
Other (e.g. Joseph Smith, Tithes, Homeschooling, Kirk Cameron)	11.7%

Appendix Two

Types, Topics, Producers at GodTube.com

It is important to note that not all of the videos featured on the GodTube comedy channel are carnivalesque. Many of them are disqualified for being more “cute” than comedic, for instance featuring the amusing antics of young children, or pets. Others have nothing to do with Christianity, aside from being deemed acceptable humor for a Christian audience. Such judgments are by their nature subjective; however, I have been careful to at least be consistent in my categorizations. I have used a liberal interpretation of what “has to do with Christianity” regardless for how peripheral that association might be, e.g. including humor generated from Christian weddings.

In order to convey the variety of videos that GodTube hosts within the Christian Comedy category I provide three distributions. The first is Type, which differentiates between professional or amateur and the mode of presentation (e.g. filmed performance, dramatization, stage skit, etc.) and falls into nine categories. Because GodTube features cover such a broad range of topics it is a challenge to categorize them. Nevertheless, in the second list I identify all Topics featured more than once (if for no other reason than to demonstrate how few of them there are). Concerning the people that have produced the content featured on the GodTube comedy channel, some have provided far more than others; the third distribution identifies the five most dominant Producers (who for the most part are also responsible for their material being posted to the site).

- Sample size (N) = 204 Videos¹²⁰
- 49 (24%) of the videos qualify as carnivalesque, exhibiting the essential elements of (1) being comedic and (2) taking as their punch-line subject Christian belief, practices, or cultural motifs.
- The survey is comprehensive; all types/topics/producers are counted, regardless of whether they qualify as carnivalesque.
- “Other” category is for items found only once within sample.

¹²⁰ The sample size of 204 represents every video listed under the sort parameters “most popular” and “all”. (“most popular” is a quantitative parameter relative to “most recent”, “view count”, “rating”; “all” is a temporal parameter relative to “today”, “this week”, “this month”, “this year”)

Table 4.1 – Modes of Presentation

<u>Type</u> ¹²¹	
<u>Frequency</u>	
Professional Comic Performance	33.8%
Professional Comic Dramatization	21.6%
Amateur Situational Film Capture	12.3%
Amateur Dramatization	5.4%
Amateur Musical Performance	4.4%
Amateur Skit Film Capture	3.9%
Amateur Photo Montage	2.4%
Amateur Musical Parody	1.4%
Professional TV/Film Clip	1.4%
Other	12.7%

Table 4.2 – GodTube Topics

<u>Topics</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Weddings	7.4%
Mom/Motherhood	7.4%
Marriage	6.9%
Dating/Girlfriends/Valentines	6.4%
Prayer	6.4%
Kids	5.9%
Dad/Fatherhood	5.4%
Invitation to Church	4.4%
Pets	2.9%
The Nativity	2.9%

¹²¹ “Professional Comic Performance” = stage performances of professional comics.

“Professional Comic Dramatization” = non-stage performances by professional comics where s/he plays a character, as in a television show or a movie.

“Amateur Situational Film Capture” = funny events caught on tape, such as might be featured on “America’s Funniest Home Videos”.

“Amateur Dramatization” = non-stage performances by amateurs playing characters, as in a television show or a movie.

“Amateur Musical Performance” = non-stage musical performances by amateurs that is not a parody of a popular or worship song.

“Amateur Skit Film Capture” = stage skits by amateurs caught on tape.

“Amateur Photo Montage” = a collection of thematic photos shown in succession.

“Amateur Musical Parody” = dramatized musical performances by amateurs that parody a popular song.

“Professional TV/Film Clip” = a portion of a TV show or film (Duck Dynasty, Madea)

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Comedy	2.9%
Worship	1.4%
Men	1.4%
Baptism	1.4%
Fishing	.9%
Parenting	.9%
Other ¹²²	35.1%

Table 4.3 – GodTube’s Top Content Producers

<u>Producers</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Tim Hawkins ¹²³	17.2%
Skit Guys ¹²⁴	8.8%
Bob Smiley ¹²⁵	3.4%
Jeanne Robertson ¹²⁶	3.4%
Anita Renfroe ¹²⁷	2.9%

¹²² Please see Appendix One for the full list of topics covered by “other”.

¹²³ Tim Hawkins is a former grocery-truck driver and self-taught guitarist who performs over 120 stand-up comedy shows a year and has released six comedy DVDs (www.timhawkins.net/bio).

¹²⁴ Skit Guys are Tommy Woodward and Eddie James, whose website describes their work as “...teaching God’s word using comedy, drama and whatever category talking action figures fit into, for over twenty years” (skitguys.com/about).

¹²⁵ Roberto Antonio (Bob) Smiley honed his Christian comedy skills touring with Christian Contemporary bands Newsboys, Third Day, and Mercy Me. He has released seven comedy DVDs and been performing live shows since 1997 (www.bobsmiley.com/bio).

¹²⁶ Jeanne Robertson is a professional speaker/comedienne who has released seven humor DVDs and been interviewed on “60 minutes”. Tall (6’2”) and striking (Miss North Carolina, 1963), she bases her humor on life experiences and in her routines only refers to her husband as “left brain” (www.jeannerobertson.com).

¹²⁷ Anita Renfroe is a professional Christian comedienne who has produced seven DVDs and five CDs of her performances and dramatizations, and regularly goes out on her own tours and in support of women’s conferences (www.anitarenfroe.com/about).

Appendix 2a

The full list of topics under “other” for GodTube videos is as follows:

Pregnancy	Sermons	Gift Cards
Government	Tithing	Ducks
Eating	Snuggie	Stress
Grocery Shopping	Morning	Trouble
Tractors	Anthems	Atheism
Hand Sanitizer	Fables	Exercise
Bad Candy	Evangelism	Noah
Baby Sitter	Driving	Hipsters
Economy	Movies	Canada
Satan	Dudes	Choir
Hand Raising	Drive-Thru Church	Dogma
Bungee Jumping	Books	Elderly
Teenagers	Theology	Validation
Chick-Fil-A	CCM (Contemporary Christian Music)	Yogi Bear
Giving Birth	Superheroes	Diet
Coffee	New Year’s Intentions	Mother’s Day
Christmas Gifts	Playgrounds	Spanking
Aging	Social Media	Hair
Childcare	Confusion	America
Dangerous Toys	Snow	Boots
Beliefs	Voting	Volkswagon
Thanksgiving	10 Commandments	Stunts
Dancing	Deer in Church	Fear
Karaoke	Sarcasm	
Rafting		

Appendix Three

Topics & Categories

Consistent with both LarkNews and GodTube, the God Jokes page features jokes covering a wide variety of topics. Many can be grouped into broad categories, so in addition to the topic distribution I provide a category distribution as well. All topics featured more than once are shown in the following list.

- Sample size (N) = 192 Postings
- 115 (59.8%) of the posts qualify as carnivalesque, exhibiting the essential elements of (1) being comedic, (2) taking as their punch-line subject Christian belief, practices, or cultural motifs, and 3) functioning to reify Christianity.
- The survey is comprehensive; all topics are counted, regardless of whether they qualify as carnivalesque
- “Other” category is for topics found only once within the sample.

Table 5.1 – God Jokes Humor Categories

<u>Categories</u>	
<u>Frequency</u> ¹²⁸	
Congregations, Individual Believers*	21.4%
Pastors*	11.5%
Other*	27.1%
Just Jokes	15.6%
Plays on Words	12.5%
Puns	6.2%
Repeats ¹²⁹	5.2%

* Carnivalesque content comes from these three categories exclusively.

Table 5.2 – God Jokes Topics

<u>Topics</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Prayer	5.7%
Church language/terms	5.2%

¹²⁸ The final .5% is represented by an unusual post that pointed to jokes hosted on BeliefNet.com.

¹²⁹ “Repeats” are jokes in the sample that were repeated, exactly, a second time. No joke in the sample was posted more than once.

Church \$ collections/bequests	5.2%
Animals/Pets	4.7%
Catholics	4.2%
Baptists	4.2%
Atheists	4.2%
Kids interpreting church/Bible	3.6%
Church signs	3.6%
Bible language/terms	3.6%
Nuns	3.2%
Boring church/Sleeping in church	3.2%
Lesser Heavenly reward	2.6%
Drinking/Alcoholism	2.6%
Evolution/Creation	2.6%
Missing from Noah's Ark	2.1%
Getting into Heaven	1.6%
Understanding wives/women	1.6%
Aging	1.6%
Blondes	1.0%
Church attendance	1.0%
Jehovah's Witnesses	1.0%
Pentecostals	1.0%
Other ¹³⁰	41.5%

¹³⁰ Please see Appendix Three for the topics grouped under "other".

Appendix 3a

The full list of topics listed under “other” for the God Jokes Facebook page is as follows:

God’s displeasure w/ humans	Pavement
Methodist casserole	Gold Bars
Enemies	Men in drag
Plastic Surgery	Crap
Trouble-making congregants	Science
Lying	Jews
Afterlife	Israel
Church sarcasm	Fishers of Men
Avocados	Nativity
Poverty	Baptism
Miracles	Door to door missionaries
Bastardy	iPhone
Distaste for congregation	Condensed Bible
Golf	Driving
Yelling	Nature of Christ
Lawyers	Moses
Hillbilly language	Walking on water
Fantasy Kissing	Denominational conflict
Women’s silence in heaven	Getting a wife
Baseball in heaven	Christian Science
Time	Sex
Computers	Suits
Pens	Mowing the lawn
Windows	Communion
Cars	Rudeness
Peace	Ushers
Drugs	Getting dessert
Neighbors	Television
Friends	Milk
Adam’s rib	Teachers
The Hereafter	Borrowing the car
Coffee	Cutting one’s hair
Hats	John the Baptist
Stamps	Parking
Choir	Teaching Sunday school
Altar	The Bahamas
Gambling	New praise songs
Bridge to Hawai’i	

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