

**Religious Satire:
Has Time Diminished Its Influence or Is It As
Effective As Ever?**

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Abstract: This paper explores religious satire as a genre of humor and whether or not its effect and influence on society diminishes as time moves forward. Religious satire from the early modern and contemporary time periods are put in direct comparison with one another, paying specific attention to the targets of each satire, the methods employed in each satire, and the reasoning behind each satirist creating religious satire in their respective time period. After comparing the satire from both time periods, I conclude that religious satire has become a more influential genre of humor as time has progressed, and contemporary religious satire leaves an overall greater impact on its audience when compared to early modern religious satire's influence.

Introduction

“Satire is tragedy plus time. You give it enough time, the public, the reviewers, will allow you to satirize it. Which is rather ridiculous, when you think about it.”

- Lenny Bruce

The Essential Lenny Bruce: Performing and the Art of Comedy
1970

Time and satire share an undeniable relationship with one another. As time progresses, the horizons of satire broaden, but is this the only relationship time and satire have with one another? Particularly, as satire as a genre progresses and advances with time, do the cultural and societal changes that surround the art hinder its impact, strengthen it, or leave it unaffected? Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines satire as “a way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish,

weak, bad, etc.” (“Satire” def. 1). Using this definition, religious satire can be defined as a way of using humor to show that religion (the beliefs, studies, organizations, followers, etc.) are foolish, weak, bad, etc. This paper focuses on the impact of religious satire from both the early modern and contemporary time periods. To clarify, the early modern time period is classified as the early 16th century to early 19th century with most of its focus residing in the 17th-18th centuries, and the contemporary time period is classified as the time period from 1945 to present day. This paper addresses the targets, methods, and reasoning behind the creation of religious satire in these two periods, whether or not they have changed with time, and whether these changes or lack thereof have affected the overall influence of religious satire. While previous studies have established that this form of humor is very effective in getting its point across, no such study exists comparing an earlier time period to a more modern one to see whether or not time has diminished the influence and effectiveness of religious satire. The main satires that will be analyzed are Jonathan Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* and John Donne’s *Satyre III* from the early modern period, and numerous stand-up skits by George Carlin from the contemporary period. Detailing and comparing the targets of the satire, the methods used in executing the satire, and the reasoning behind satirists choosing to write religious satire, it is clear that contemporary religious satire has a much stronger influence on its specific audience than early modern religious satire. This is important to detail because if religious satire’s influence on society has grown over the centuries, this could also mean that its influence will continue to grow as time goes on and could potentially lead to the genre having some influence on its audiences’ religious beliefs.

Religion’s Role in Society: Early Modern vs. Contemporary

To examine religious satire from two separate time periods, it is important that the time periods themselves are first examined and put into context regarding the role of religion in society during that specific time. In the early modern time period, around the time Jonathan Swift was writing his religious satire (~1704-1729), the influence of religion

on English and Irish societies was gradually becoming more prevalent. Around this time, The Great Awakening was beginning, which was a time in the 18th century when the influence of religion in society was revitalized and grew stronger than it was before. The Library of Congress of the United States details this time in history by saying, “The Great Awakening swept the English-speaking world, as religious energy vibrated between England, Wales, Scotland and the American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s” (“Religion in Eighteenth-Century America”). Just before this Great Awakening, religion’s influence on society wasn’t nearly as high as it was during the 1730s and 1740s. Benjamin Franklin, who admired Jonathan Swift’s work so much that he based his “Poor Richard” persona off of Swift’s pseudonym, Isaac Bickerstaff, describes the sudden change in society in his autobiography, saying, “from being thoughtless or indifferent about Religion, it seem’d as if all the World were growing Religious; so that one could not walk thro’ the Town in an Evening without Hearing Psalms sung in different Families of every Street” (44). Jonathan Swift wrote his religious satire, *A Tale of a Tub*, during the time just before The Great Awakening occurred. If Swift were to write this satire while “the whole world were growing religious” as Franklin describes it, it would not have been as effective as it was because his audience would have found it offensive as opposed to humorous. His audience would question his motives and ask why a man would write a work slandering religion during a time of religious revitalization. This could lead to readers accusing Swift of defamation, which runs equivalent to how certain present societies have laws where slander or defamation against a country’s belief system is a punishable offense. Based on the societal change of religious revitalization alone, it can be seen that timing and circumstances are very important when dealing with religious satire. A religious satire written during The Great Awakening would tend to offend rather than entertain its audience, whereas a religious satire written in a time where religion is not viewed in high regard by society would be seen as entertaining as opposed to offensive.

In the contemporary time period, however, the influence that religion has on society has shown a gradual decline. With the advancement of Atheism in the 20th century, religion's influence on society has decreased rapidly year after year. One study conducted in 2012 by Tom W. Smith, entitled "Beliefs About God Across Time and Countries," analyzed survey data from 30 countries dating as far back as 1991 to observe the trends of waning religious belief. Smith came to an ultimate conclusion that:

Belief in God has decreased in most countries, but the declines are quite modest especially when calculated on a per annum basis. It is only the repetition of the modest declines across measures and countries that make the case for a general diminution in belief in God. This is further illustrated by the situation in the United States. Belief in God remains high, but has slowly eroded from the 1950s to the present. If the modest, general trend away from belief in God continues uninterrupted, it will accumulate to larger proportions and the atheism that is now prominent mainly in northwest Europe and some ex-Socialist states may spread more widely. (5)

While the decline of belief in God was minor in most of the countries observed, this minor decline repeated year after year, which translated into a large decline over the span of decades. If the belief in God has been declining gradually since the 1950s, as suggested in this study, that means religion has been losing influence on Americans little by little for well over 60 years now. While religion's influence decreased, more comedians found themselves creating religious satire in this time period, such as Roman-Catholic turned Atheist comedian, George Carlin. Since the influence of religion was dwindling in the contemporary time period, it didn't take much for Carlin to successfully gain an audience in regards to his religious satire. When looking at these two time periods in a very broad sense, it is seen that the influence of religion in both periods differed drastically. This differing influence

plays a huge role in the effect, or lack of effect, religious satire had on early modern and contemporary society.

Religious Satire: Who Are the Targets?

With the differing influence of religion in the early modern and contemporary time periods, do the targets of the religious satire also differ? If they do, what effect does this have on the impact of the religious satire? To answer these questions, the aforementioned religious satires will have to be examined first hand. Xiang Xu, an author for the College of Foreign Language in China, looks closely at Jonathan Swift's religious satire and observes who or what Swift is targeting in "Jonathan Swift's Journey of Religious Satire." Xu points out, "In A Tale of a Tub, Swift attacks mainly Roman Catholics and Puritans, the two branches of Christian church; in "Arguments against Abolishing Christianity", his target is Christianity as a whole; then in Gulliver's Travels, he levels a heavy blow to all religions in general" (48). Notice how none of these targets are specific people, but are organized groups of people. While people may get offended by Swift's work because he is ridiculing groups that people are directly correlated with, it does not leave as great of an impact as insulting the people directly. Direct, personal insult is the route George Carlin chooses to take in his religious satire of the contemporary time period. In his HBO special, *You Are All Diseased* (1999), Carlin goes into great detail about why not only religion and the idea of a God are idiotic, but also the people who choose to believe in these things are idiotic as well. He says, "So rather than be just another mindless religious robot, mindlessly and aimlessly and blindly believing that all of this is in the hands of some spooky incompetent father figure who doesn't give a shit, I decided to look around for something else to worship. Something I could really count on" (Carlin). When watching this routine, Carlin says this line pretty swiftly, so it is rather subtle and can be easily missed. The main point that needs to be taken away from this specific line is the fact that he calls the people who believe in religion and God "mindless robots". This shows that Carlin is attacking the people who choose to believe in religion and God, specifically, while

also targeting the religion as a whole like Swift did in the early modern time period. Attacking people directly could be seen as having a greater impact on the audience than attacking the entities of religion because the audience is directly in the line of fire. They are the ones being ridiculed and Carlin is addressing their stupidity by calling anyone who believes in God and religion “mindless robots.” Would a person tend to take more offense from satire directed at something they agree with and believe in or satire directed at them specifically? Generally, people would get more offended from the latter, which shows that Carlin’s targets of choice in his religious satire leave a bigger impact and have a greater influence on his contemporary time period audience when compared to Swift’s early modern time period audience. This point will be further discussed in the next section through analysis of John Morreall’s research pertaining to philosophy and religion.

Religious Satire: How Are These Targets Being Satirized?

Since satirists were aiming at different targets in their religious satire during both time periods, they may also have been using different methods to satirize them. Morreall’s *Philosophy and Religion* uncovers these different methods through discussions of the different theories of laughter and when they gained relevance in relation to the varying time periods. He states, “Until the middle of the 18th century, the only developed theory of laughter in Western thought was the Superiority Theory. According to the theory, laughter is an expression of feelings of superiority over people” (Morreall 211). This theory is simple enough to understand: people feel good about themselves when they observe that certain qualities they possess are “better” than others to the point where it becomes humorous. John Donne utilizes this method excessively in his satirical poem, *Satyre III*. Throughout the poem, Donne is searching for clarity on which religion is the “right one” to follow. In order to effectively find the right religion, he must weigh in all of the possibilities of the varying religions, no matter how absurd he feels they are, prior to analyzing them. The first four lines of the poem start off in a cocky manner, in which he antagonizes his own countrymen for their beliefs.

M. Thomas Hester, a Donne scholar, analyzes these first four lines to explain Donne’s message in his work, “‘All Our Soules Devotion’: Satire as Religion in Donne’s *Satyre III*.” Hester summarizes these lines by saying, “The thrust of his announcement is that he must not ‘laugh’ only at the sins of his countrymen nor ‘weepe’ only for their condition. Rather, because these ‘maladies’ are ‘worne,’ that is, habitual and therefore not easily displaced, he must disclose the idiocy of such practices (through ridicule--‘brave scorn’)” (38). Through Hester’s summary it can be seen that Donne is blatantly mocking the intelligence of his fellow countrymen. Donne is laughing at their sins, weeping for their “condition”, which refers to their lack of intellect and realization that they are even sinning in the first place. Donne calls their conditions “maladies” that they were born with and can’t easily get rid of (habitual.) In order to combat the idiocy Donne is facing from his countrymen, he must ridicule them (“brave scorn”) through this poem. Based on all of these observations, Donne puts himself high above everyone else in the country and decrees his intelligence far superior. When Donne’s fellow countrymen read this satire, would they have found it humorous? Since the readers and the targets of the satire are one and the same, it becomes difficult for the reader to find humor in the satire when it is directly insulting their intelligence regarding their religious beliefs. While the methods used by Donne in his satire may have been effective in getting his point across regarding religion, his fellow countrymen probably did not find it too funny since their intelligence and beliefs were being directly ridiculed and insulted. Donne’s methods differ greatly from the methods used by contemporary religious satirists, such as George Carlin.

While it was mentioned earlier that George Carlin indeed targeted religious people specifically in his satire, it is the methods he chose to employ in his satire that makes the situation far different than Donne’s. What made Carlin so successful as a religious satirist in the contemporary time period was the fact that he strayed far away from the Superiority Theory described by Morreall -- a theory which dates back to the times of Aristotle-- that Donne utilized, and put himself on

the same level as everyone else. One might believe that Donne and Carlin are products of the same genre since they both target religious people specifically in their satire, but because Carlin did not utilize the Superiority Theory as Donne did, it makes the situation much more different. After Carlin's HBO Special, *You Are All Diseased*, he was interviewed by James A. Haught, who was the Senior Editor of *Free Inquiry*. *Free Inquiry* is a journal focused on secular humanism, or the study of human existence without the need of religious beliefs, dogmas, or organizations. Haught asked Carlin about his methods when satirizing serious topics, such as religion, and Carlin responded: "Well, first of all, just to give a little context, the thing I do is rhetoric. What I'm doing is painting with a very broad brush" (Haught 43). Carlin used rhetoric in an attempt to persuade his adversaries that what he was saying was to be taken as factual. He painted pictures of religious scenarios in his standup routines in relation to the society that believed in them with a very broad brush so that he was not interpreting religion for his audience, but the audience was doing the interpreting themselves. Because he chose not to speak of his religious opinions as factual, he is also performing the exact opposite of Morreall's Superiority Theory that Donne utilized and is putting himself on the same level as his audience. This makes his satire much more approachable and in a way, a little bit less offensive to his audience members because they are not viewing him as an arrogant know-it-all in the way that people viewed Donne in his religious satire. Carlin was still considered offensive in the eyes of religious individuals and institutions because of his satire, but the methods he used to discuss these topics is what made it far more successful than religious satirists of the early modern period, such as Donne. This shows that while both Donne and Carlin targeted religious people specifically, the differing methods employed in their satire play a huge role in its success and it can be concluded that Carlin's methods were much more effective compared to Donne's methods of superiority.

The Motives Behind Creating Religious Satire

Prior to the creation of religious satire, a satirist needed to have

motives or reasons for creating the humor in the first place. Typically, one would think that the only people who create religious satire are non-religious people who have some sort of unresolved vendetta with the religion they choose to satirize in their work, which is not always the case. For example Jonathan Swift, who was arguably the most well-known and impactful religious satirist of the early modern period, was a clergyman. Xu examines this fascinating fact, stating, "As a cleric, [Swift] was devoted to his duty, preparing his sermons arduously, serving his congregations full-heartedly, and defending the Church of Ireland militantly. However, his attitude towards church and religion was contradictory" (45). Not only was Swift a cleric, but he was also an enthusiastic one, which shows that Swift did not have an unresolved vendetta with being a clergyman, but rather with the way people viewed the church and religion at the time. If all of these observations are true, what made his attitude towards the church and religion "contradictory?" David Bywaters, an English professor at Northern Illinois University whose main interests include the political, historical, and religious contexts for Jonathan Swift, analyzes the true motives behind Swift's satire in "Anticlericism in Swift's Tale of a Tub." Bywaters details the audience Swift writes *Tale of a Tub* for when he says he "wrote for a general, lay audience, the sort of people who routinely laughed at the pompous, self-interested stage-priests...and who otherwise did not much concern themselves with theological controversy or philosophical speculation...Swift's purpose in the Tale is to defend the Church..." (579). Swift wrote *Tale of a Tub* not to attack, but to defend his position as a clergyman due to the amount of contempt that clergymen were receiving at the time. Since the clergymen were receiving so much scorn, they were viewed as easy targets by scholars such as William Wotton and Richard Bentley, both of whom Bywaters goes into greater detail about in his research. Knowing Swift's stance on his role in the church, it starts to make sense that he is writing religious satire to defend his position and the church and to show that a satirist does not need to attack religious entities for their satire to be considered religious

satire. How does this compare to a religious satirist whose motives lie in attacking religion?

It is no secret that George Carlin is highly critical of religion because he makes it extremely obvious in a number of his stand-up routines, but what reasons does he have for having this view of religion? Like Jonathan Swift, George Carlin also comes from a religious upbringing. In his HBO special, *Back in Town* (1996), Carlin introduces religion into his routine by going into detail about his experience with religion in his earlier years. He transitions into a religious tangent when he says:

Speaking of consistency, Catholics—which I was until I reached the age of reason, Catholics and other Christians are against abortions, and they’re against homosexuals. Well who has less abortions than homosexuals?! Leave these fucking people alone, for Christ sakes! Here is an entire class of people guaranteed never to have an abortion! And the Catholics and Christians are just tossing them aside! You’d think they’d make natural allies. Go look for consistency in religion.” (Carlin).

Though the first line in this joke is extremely simple, it is also saying a lot at once and is extremely effective in regards to Carlin getting his point across. The first thing it is doing is revealing that Carlin does indeed come from a religious upbringing—specifically, a Catholic one. He then reveals that he is no longer a Catholic because he reached an “age of reason,” which is highly critical of Catholicism in saying that if you believe the teachings of Catholicism, you have either not reached your specific “age of reason” or you have no natural reasoning to begin with. This simple line leads into the rest of the joke about the inconsistencies that are attached to religion and religious associations, such as Catholics and Christians being opposed to abortions. Another inconsistency he points out is, “Life is sacred? Who said so? God? Hey, if you read history, you realize that God is one of the leading causes of death. Has been for thousands of years. Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians, all

taking turns killing each other ‘cause God told them it was a good idea” (Carlin). As he is calling attention to these inconsistencies, he repeats something that almost goes unnoticed between the crowd’s laughter: “go look for consistency in religion” (Carlin). This line highlights Carlin’s motive behind performing this religious satire, which is that he feels believers should open their eyes to the numerous inconsistencies that religion embeds in their beliefs. Rather than defending religion like Swift does in *Tale of a Tub*, Carlin goes right on the offensive and points out numerous contradictions that, to him, make all religion inconsistent and unbelievable. When comparing the motives of Swift and Carlin in their satire, it can be seen that the difference between an attacking motive and a defending motive creates quite a difference in material and also proves that aggressiveness in approach has the potential to lead to a more successful satire with the audience. This also shows that contemporary religious satirists have stronger motives behind their satire when compared to the motives of early modern satirists, which is one of the underlying reasons why religious satire of the contemporary period has left a greater impact on society than satire of the early modern period.

Conclusion

The timing and circumstances of religious satire can mean the difference between a person being a successful, entertaining satirist and a failing, offensive satirist. The impact and influence of religious satire can also greatly affect society and how religion is viewed in our lives. If religious satirists are successful with their material, they have a special power over their audience that allows them to alter their audience’s beliefs and even convert them from one side of the argument to the other. This may contribute to Atheism’s gradual increase over the past sixty years: today’s society is at a point where religion isn’t considered as important as it was during a time like *The Great Awakening*, and religious satirists are taking advantage of this opportunity. Looking to the future, is it possible for the impact and influence of religious satire to get any stronger than it already is? Has religious satire reached its maximum influence on society? The only way that these questions

can be answered is by continuing analysis and observation of religious satire as time endlessly progresses. If religious satire's influence has not reached its tipping point, then society could be approaching a time where religious satirists may have the ultimate power of transforming the entire world to the same belief system and completely abolishing religion as a whole.

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