Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies

CHRISTIANITY AND THE TRIUMPH OF HUMOR

FROM DANTE TO DAVID JAVERBAUM

Bernard Schweizer

ROUTLEDGE

Christianity and the Triumph of Humor

This book traces the development of religious comedy and leverages that history to justify today's uses of religious humor in all of its manifestations, including irreverent jokes. It argues that regulating humor is futile and counterproductive, illustrating this point with a host of comedic examples. Humor is a powerful rhetorical tool for those who advocate and for those who satirize religious ideals.

The book presents a compelling argument about the centrality of humor to the story of Western Christianity's cultural and artistic development since the Middle Ages, taking a multi-disciplinary approach that combines literary criticism, religious studies, philosophy, theology, and social science. After laying out the conceptual framework in Part 1, Part 2 analyzes key works of religious comedy across the ages from Dante to the present, and it samples the breadth of contemporary religious humor from Brad Stine to Robin Williams, and from Monty Python to *South Park*. Using critical, historical, and conceptual lenses, the book exposes and overturns past attempts by church authorities, scholars, and commentators to limit and control laughter based on religious, ideological, or moral criteria.

This is a unique look into the role of humor and comedy around religion. It will, therefore, be of great interest to scholars of Religious Studies, Humor Studies, and the Sociology of Religion.

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Contents

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Figures

Tables

Abbreviation

KL Kindle Location

Introduction

The way, the truth, and the laugh

> Religion continues to be regarded as a deeply serious matter that has little do to with genuine laughter.
>
> – Richard Cote

> It is good to be reminded that laughter was considered conducive to piety.
>
> – Max Harris

When Mark Twain wrote "against the assault of laughter nothing can stand" (*Mysterious* 132), he was thinking of religion as one of the principal targets which "laughter can blow . . . to rags and atoms at a blast" (132). Following this logic, one could conclude that laughter is a potent antidote against the powers of dogma, conformity, and (blind) faith. If humor and religion are indeed engaged in a zero-sum game, then the more amusement there is, the less holiness can exist in the same space, and vice versa. This idea dates back to Plato and Aristotle, both of whom not only had ethical misgivings about laughter but saw it as an affront to the sacred. In the Christian context, numerous theologians and church authorities over the centuries have similarly denounced mirth and levity as morally questionable and potentially impious. Clement, Jerome, Basil, Ambrose, Saint Augustine, Hugh of Saint Victor, and many others have warned sternly against the corrupting, sinful, and outright demonic aspects of laughter (Cote 25). Saint Chrysostom's dictum that "Christ never laughed" was meant approvingly. Based on this ethos, the view took hold that "Weeping alone unites with God, while laughter leads a person away from God, alienates Christians from their Creator" (Kuschel 47). Passages in the Hebrew Bible confirm this negative assessment of mirth. For instance, we can read in Ecclesiastes (2:2), "I said of laughter it is mad, and of mirth what good doeth it?"

This has led to the suspicion that religiosity may be inherently inimical to laughter. One scholar, Vassilis Saroglou, has published articles claiming as much: "From a psychological, and especially from a personality psychology perspective, religion associates negatively with personality traits, cognitive

structures and social consequences typical to humor: incongruity, ambiguity, possibility of nonsense, low dogmatism and low authoritarianism, playfulness, spontaneity, attraction to novelty and risk" (205). Based on this logic, the more religious people are, the worse their sense of humor. Yet, on closer inspection, such views appear overblown and too easily falsifiable, especially given the real differences that exist between various religious traditions' attitudes to humor. At most, Saroglou's identification of religiousness with anti-comical traits would seem to apply to religious extremism (Morreall 48). As Conrad Hyers has argued, fundamentalism of any kind is a fun killer: "Ideologies, whether social, political, or economic, have a high level of missionary and often military zeal but a low level of comic awareness" (Hyers 114).

But while the notion is quite widespread that religiosity diminishes the sense of humor, the opposite view, namely that humor and religion are in fact symbiotic, also enjoys currency. The philosopher Peter Berger saw an inherently spiritual dimension in laughter (see *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*); Charles Campbell, a professor at the Duke School of Divinity, thinks of Christ as a jester and of Christianity as a form of holy foolishness (see *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*); and Max Harris has demonstrated that close ties existed between devotion and hilarity during the Middle Ages. In his book *Sacred Folly: A New History of the Feast of Fools*, Harris drily remarks "it is good to be reminded that laughter was considered conducive to piety" (148).

My approach to the subject of laughter and religion is not to favor one side or the other among these two stances but rather to show how the two sides of the coin are related to one another. My point of departure is the realization that religion attracts humor in all of its forms. There is something about priests and monastics that has prompted people since time immemorial (including religious believers) to joke at their expense; there is something about inflexible claims of dogma that feeds into the hands of humorists; and there is something about God and supernatural agents that begs the question, provoking skepticism and irreverent speculations. I'm not just referring to joking *about* religion. Indeed, while humor often niggles subversively at the foundations and manifestations of religion, it can also inhabit a space that is internal to religion, coexisting with a pious outlook. In the Christian context, the presence of humor manifests itself clearly in the works of late-medieval Christian authors like Boccaccio and Chaucer, and it expresses itself in religious folk traditions like the Feast of Fools, held annually in central Europe during Christmas and New Year.

Having said this, it would be naïve to think that humor can be smoothly integrated into religious proceedings. Often, the eruption of laughter gives rise to the suspicion that something unseemly and perhaps even downright subversive is afoot. A good deal of evidence supports this impression. Why would medieval religious authorities go to the trouble of condemning and outlawing the Feast of Fools and other pro-comical religious folk traditions

if they were not convinced that comedy was detrimental to the spirit of reverence? The theologians of the University of Paris as well as the members of the Council of Basel who in 1431 and 1444, respectively, banned practices associated with the Feast of Fools (under threat of severe punishment) were apparently prompted to take such drastic measures by the understanding that laughter has no place in sanctified proceedings and that mirth is indeed an antidote to devotion. The same goes for Pope Clement's decree in 1776 banning the practice of Easter Laughter (*risus paschalis*) in Germany.[1] Although motivated by a devotional spirit, such eruptions of laughter within holy proceedings were anathema to the Church authorities, who suppressed these folksy practices whenever they could.

The tug of war between official Christian forces arraigned against laughter and the popular (and literary) impulse to fuse religion with mirth was eventually decided in favor of laughter – hence the reference to the "triumph of humor" in the book's title. This triumph was neither predictable nor inevitable. Chapter 3 of this book tells the story of how it came about, giving special emphasis to the function of free expression and unfettered thought to make possible the progressive expansion of a dynamic humor culture in the West. If today we see Pope Francis flashing an open-mouthed laugh from magazine covers, or when we clap along with the catchy tune of "Hasa Diga Eebowai" ("Fuck you, God") during a performance of *The Book of Mormon*, we do so because laughter and mirth have become quite thoroughly naturalized in Christian culture, including expressions that are clearly irreverent. My book shows how we got here, chronicling a long process that started with the Renaissance, was accelerated in the Enlightenment, and fully came into its own during the 20th century.

Theology was late to catch on to the realization that laughter is more than just an irritant in the body of religion. One of the seminal figures to turn the scales in favor of a more accepting theological stance toward laughter was the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard. The father of existentialism – a philosophy predicated upon the inherent absurdity of existence – offered a surprising insight, namely, that there is something intrinsically comical about Christianity itself! In Kierkegaard's view, incongruity – one of the most powerful mechanisms of laughter – is written into the very fabric of religion: mere mortals trying to connect with the infinite; the body eternally at war with the demands of spirituality; divine perfection rubbing up against human fallibility, how ironic! Kierkegaard saw this irony as fundamental to the human condition, and he acknowledged the human impulse, and perhaps even the need, to laugh in the face of such incongruities. More specifically, Kierkegaard thought that Christianity constituted the pinnacle of incongruity. When he wrote that "All humor [is] developed from Christianity itself" (*Journals and Papers* 2:229), he was referring to the figure of Christ as both human and divine, mortal and immortal. To Kierkegaard, this was a powerful paradox that merited being considered under the rubric of divine humor.

The US theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was rather more circumspect in his reassessment of laughter one hundred years later. Niebuhr wrote in 1944 that "Humor is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer." Though unorthodox with regard to the Church's long-standing anti-laughter bias, Niebuhr stopped short of a radical realignment, admitting that "Laughter is swallowed up in prayer and humour is fulfilled by faith" (49). This does not exclude laughter but assigns it a secondary, complementary role in the world of faith. To Niebuhr, laughter belonged in the antechamber of holy places, not in the inner sanctum itself.

Harvey Cox, one of the founders of the modern "theology of laughter," opened the door for Christian humor even further in the second half of the 20th century. In his book *The Feast of Fools* (1969), he defended the physical, bodily aspect of laughter, which for most of Christianity's history had drawn the most determined opposition from ecclesiastical and theological authorities. In tune with the 1960s counterculture, Cox advocated "the redemption of the body without embarrassment" (55), which naturally included accepting the impulses of humor that set the body shaking. For Cox, denying human laughter, motivated by any sort of rationale, including religious prohibition, is a denial of people's humanity. Cox did not stop there but pressed on into heterodox territory by associating the figure of Christ with that of a jester. Gilhus comments that "In Cox's thinking, Christ as a clown . . . the reinstallation of the body, and the laughing Christian were all linked" (113). Cox took his cue from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where the Apostle referred to the "foolishness of the cross," reminding his fellow congregants to be "Fools for Christ." In this view, foolishness signifies one's acceptance of value inversions taught by Christ such as that humility triumphs over force, that poverty is a blessing, and that the last shall be the first. To accept such unconventional precepts and to worship a savior who was born into a lowly manger is indeed equivalent to accepting a sort of inverted or "foolish" worldview.

But to make room inside Christianity for applications of benign humor is one thing. It is quite another thing to accept humor that rips holes into the fabric of religious faith, that ridicules holy personages, and that mocks God – the very effects of laughter that Mark Twain had in mind when he said that "laughter can blast it [humbug] to rags and atoms" (142) Even while benign laughter was given a religious rationale by Kierkegaard and while "clean" comedy was rehabilitated by the 20th-century theologians of laughter, there are other uses of comedy that cannot easily be reconciled within such a devout framework. I am referring to the satirical, mocking, and outright blasphemous uses of humor by the likes of Mark Twain, Anatole France, and Jaroslav Hašek, all the way to Woody Allen, George Carlin, and, of course, Monty Python.

Their irreverent and dogma-dissolving uses of laughter have led many thinkers, following Mikhail Bakhtin, to conclude that there is something inherently subversive and perhaps even heretical in comedy as such. Bakhtin's

theory of carnivalesque comedy (as laid out, specifically, in his book *Rabelais and His World* [1968]), powerfully supported the idea that laughter is a fundamentally liberating and counter-hegemonic force: "Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation" (*Rabelais* 123). Over time, this notion of laughter's supposedly liberalizing potential has entered the scholarly mainstream and solidified into a shared consensus, coloring the work of Peter Berger, Barry Sanders, Alison Dagnes, Mary Douglas, Charles Campbell, Johan Cilliers, and many others.

The topic of laughter's purported subversive, anti-establishment effect is particularly relevant at the current time, though perhaps more so in a secular than in a religious sense. Indeed, the popularity of comical attacks against President Trump – evidenced from skits on *Saturday Night Live* to Stephen Colbert's farcical impersonation of him on the *Late Show* – is indicative of the desire to harness comedy as a force of resistance and perhaps even of political subversion. At this time of heightened political partisanship and ideological rancor, we have entered what the *Washington Post* called the "golden age of comedy" (Izadi). The *Post* article went on to state that, paradoxically, "Comedy is being taken more seriously now. Top-billing stand-up comedians are treated as public intellectuals" (Izadi). My book cannot bypass these larger ideological ramifications of laughter, which play out in the religious as well as in the secular, political arenas. Indeed, Part 1 of this study is dedicated to fleshing out the ideological and theological ramifications of laughter to prepare the ground for a fruitful and informed engagement with the historical and cultural manifestations of religious comedy.

Chapter 1 investigates and questions the hypothesis that humor is somehow fundamentally coded liberal and that it articulates a fulsome resistance to authority. A slew of counter-examples and some pointed historical theses about the political role of humor will put a crimp into the thesis – advanced most forcefully by Alison Dagnes in recent times – that humor is somehow more compatible with a liberal than a conservative outlook. This supposed link between humor and progressive ideology is further undermined by quantitative data from my own humor appreciation research. After deconstructing the supposed causal link between liberalism and humor, I develop a more nuanced and realistic conceptual framework that identifies four distinct humor modes according to their liminal (boundary-testing) or their entrenching (boundary-reinforcing) qualities. This four-factor humor analysis can account for a wide variety of comical works, irrespective of their political content, ideological slant, or moral implication. Rather than applying Aristotelian logic to characterize products of the comical spirit as either liberating or regressive, "benign" or "harmful," progressive or reactionary, I show how different comedians actualize any (or all) of the four humor modes, often in one and the same text or performance. By demonstrating the historical salience of all four types of humor, including the most aggressive ones, I effectively counter simplistic calls for censorship

aimed at caustic and offensive jokes. In this manner, Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for a productive, non-judgmental, and detached treatment of the way humor engages symbolical and social boundaries of all kinds, not just religious boundaries. My analysis complements the historical survey of religious humor to advance a free speech argument in favor of admitting of all kinds of humor, including blasphemous ones.

Chapter 2 tackles questions surrounding the *morality* of humor, considering the issue from an explicitly Christian standpoint. This chapter starts with an overview of official Christian teachings on laughter since the second century CE. A sampling of some of the typical anti-laughter statements that have been handed down to us from Church authorities and theologians across the centuries shows why official Christianity has for a long time been considered averse to laughter. A Christian "theology of laughter," which emphasized the desirable and even salutary potentials of laughter, emerged in the 1980s to counter such negative Christian views of laughter. My overview clarifies the basic premises underlying the Christian theology of laughter, while highlighting its judgmental tendency to divide laughter into a joyful, "positive" and a caustic, "negative" kind. Although the theology of laughter admits that the Church's historical condemnation of mirth and laughter has been misguided and even regrettable, the same theology cannot appreciate laughter in all its shadings and meanings, including irreverent, mocking, and disparaging applications of humor. Just as I question and ultimately reject the view that humor is inherently liberal, so I explore and eventually disqualify the concept that "negative" humor should be shunned. Indeed, such binary views of humor cannot stand up to skeptical inquiry. Again, the four-factor humor analysis introduced in the previous chapter will help to move the discussion away from overly simplistic ideological and moral axioms.

After discussing the ideological, moral, and theological ramifications of humor in Part 1, the book switches gears in Part 2 to present the theme from a diachronic (historical) and a synchronic (contemporaneous) perspective. Chapter 3 offers a selective overview of religious comedy in literature from the late Middle Ages (Dante and Boccaccio) to the contemporary scene (Ron Currie and David Javerbaum). Here I document the encroachment of laughter upon the Christian ethos of solemnity over time, attended by the simultaneous weakening of the Christian opposition to laughter. Early Christianity set itself in opposition to the permissive culture of "paganism" with its deities of eroticism and laughter. But the spirit of fun, laughter, and hilarity could not be permanently kept in check, both on the level of popular comedic practices and on the level of highbrow literature. My approach shows how one taboo after another was eroded over time, as the range of humor targets expanded from poking fun at clerics, to poking fun at the church and its leaders, to making light of God, and finally to laughing at the entire theistic project. This hefty chapter aims not only at providing a literary survey of the "greatest hits" of religious comedy in the West, but it also shows how

the progressive expansion of unfettered comical expression has provided immeasurable cultural enrichment across the centuries.

Chapter 4 looks in depth at contemporary pop cultural manifestations of religious comedy in the Anglo-American world. I discuss performances ranging from Christian stand-up comedians like Brad Stine and Mark Lowry, to mild religious parodies performed by the likes of Robin Williams and Rowan Atkinson, to more provokingly irreverent satires like *Life of Brian*, and finally to openly sacrilegious material like the animated comedy show *South Park*. This overview leads to two conclusions: Supposedly "harmless" Christian comedy actually contains a good deal of material that turns out on closer inspection to be disparaging and even subversive, whereas supposedly "negative," blasphemous, and offensive religious comedy fulfills legitimate intellectual and philosophical functions while carrying significant aesthetic merit. Indeed, some of the most offensive religious comedies (like the blasphemous YouTube series *DarkMatter2525*) advance sophisticated theological points and contribute to the expansion of free thought, while promoting legitimate debates about religious dogmas. Other abrasive comedies such as *The Book of Mormon* are inarguably vehicles of both belly laughs *and* of aesthetic pleasure. Again, the point of this chapter is to move beyond the simple binaristic "either/or" framework that promotes positive, "clean" forms of humor while condemning the negative, irreverent types of mirth. Approaching humor in terms of a rigid dichotomy is both inaccurate and unproductive.

An Epilogue following the Conclusion serves to widen the scope of the current inquiry by considering the role of humor in other religious traditions outside of Christianity. Here I provide a concise overview of the meanings and functions of laughter in Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. Such a wider perspective serves to round off the theme by providing information about humor's place in different religious contexts and by developing a basis for comparative approaches. The Epilogue first looks at two religious traditions, Buddhism and Hinduism, that seem to accommodate humor rather well. Here, I focus on the factors that make these religious traditions so receptive to laughter. Next, I present an overview of humor's important role in Judaism, indicating the most persuasive reasons that have been advanced by humor scholars to explain why Jewish humor has developed its distinctive style and what has led to its unprecedented popularity, especially in US culture. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the role of laughter in Islam. A common view has taken hold in the West that Muslims suffer from a collective, congenital lack of humor. Islamist attacks against satirical newspapers and riots in the Muslim world against cartoons deemed blasphemous have promoted the idea that Muslims can't take (or make) a joke. Against this backdrop, I will shed light on what Islam's holy texts actually say about laughter and mirth. From these sources, I distill a scripturally sanctioned Islamic "rule" of humor, which I will compare with Western secular humor practices. The Epilogue concludes with a discussion

of blasphemy in relation to the principle of free speech, providing a strong and unqualified endorsement of humor in all its forms, notwithstanding the tendency of both reactionary religious forces and of some social justice advocates to try to turn the clock of humorous liberty back to a time of censorship and thin-skinned sensitivity.

Note

1 During Easter week, priests would prompt their congregations to laughter, both to manifest their joy at Christ's resurrection and also to scorn the devil who had been cheated out of possessing Christ's soul.

Part 1

Ideological and theological coordinates of humor

1 Ideology and laughter

Against the liberal paradigm of humor

> In contemporary American culture, comedy is a genre that often thrives on the transgression of boundaries.
>
> – Christopher M. Leighton

Part 1 of this book examines and overturns two major dichotomies that have dogged the thinking about humor: The first dichotomy holds that humor is inherently coded liberal and that it is essentially an anti-authoritarian, disruptive phenomenon. According to this view, conservatism and orthodoxy are antithetical to humor. The second dualistic assessment relates to the moral distinction between "positive" and "negative" effects (or intentions) of laughter. According to this approach, laughter is either a positive expression of joy and goodwill or a lamentable manifestation of mockery, cynicism, and arrogance. As I will demonstrate, the reality of humor is too fluid and complex to be captured by such simplistic prescriptive norms. Therefore, a more flexible and responsive model needs to be developed to do justice to the slippery, contextual, and contingent nature of humor. Chapter 1 lays out a critique of the *ideological* paradigm of humor, concluding with the introduction of a non-binary system of classifications, my four-factor model of humor. Chapter 2 explores the *moral* paradigm imposed by the Christian theology of laughter, according to which laughter manifests itself in a "positive" or a "negative" register.

Is humor inherently liberal?

Statements linking comedy with a liberal, and particularly a subversive, mindset are legion. David Banatar, for instance, has pointed out that "it is because of humour's subversive power that many a despot has sought to prohibit humor that mocks him or his associates" (34). Wylie Sypher wrote that "Comedy is a momentary and publicly useful resistance to authority and an escape from its pressures" (241–242). Similarly, Paul McDonald noted that "When we are in a humorous mode we are also more adept at thinking critically . . . making us more likely to challenge rather than acquiesce to the

powers-that-be" (80). Gilbert Leung maintains that "Laughter can be seen as an irruptive displacement of being and creative sovereign moment that poses a challenge not only to law as understood in the widest senses of the word, but also to any matrix of laws, mores, traditions, values, identifications, etc. that may persist in unresponsive fixity" (276). The British anthropologist Mary Douglas thinks of jokes as "an attack on control" (149), and she insists that "all jokes have this subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas" (150). This notion that humor has an innately liberating, anti-dogmatic tendency often shades into a perception of humor as essentially aligned with a liberal political stance. In his book *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious*, Adam Krause writes that "the path to tolerance and the path to laughter are identical" (22–23), insisting that "a comedic mindset can help us develop a more free and democratic society" (12). Even more politically explicit, Alison Dagnes maintains that

> The philosophy of conservatism is incompatible with political humor but liberalism suits it quite nicely. Conservatism supports institutions and satire aims to knock these institutions down a peg. This doesn't necessarily mean there is bias afoot, but it does mean there is going to be more left-leaning material than right. The very nature of satire mandates challenges to the power structure, targets across the board, and an ability to take a nuanced or relativist examination of an issue in order to make the joke, and this falls squarely into the tool belt of liberalism. (KL 5–6)

In their different ways, all these sources suggest that political comedy (and beyond that humor in general) resists power and destabilizes authority, promoting instead modes of thinking that foster criticism, openness, flexibility, and emancipation – the hallmarks of liberalism.

At first sight, this view appears to have a lot going for it. For one thing, the majority of contemporary US comedians are self-identified liberals (Dagnes xiv; Day 5). Moreover, those who believe that humor is at home on the liberal side of the ideological spectrum must have felt vindicated by the presidential transition from Barack Obama to Donald J. Trump. On the one hand, there was the liberal Barack Obama, a politician with a real comical gift. For eight years straight, he was headlining the annual White House Correspondents' dinners, delivering well-timed, snappy, cleverly funny monologues that can withstand comparison with the best contemporary comedians like Jon Stewart or Larry Wilmore. This talent has earned Obama the moniker "Comedian in Chief." On the other hand, there is the curmudgeonly Trump, a Republican who angrily berates people who make fun of him and whose attempts at delivering a comical monologue have occasionally bombed.[1]

But not only does the liberal president (Obama) "win" in a direct comparison with his conservative successor (Trump) when it comes to comical talent, but it is further significant that the liberal *opposition* to Donald Trump expresses itself prominently through channels of comedy. Even before Trump

was sworn in, he had been the target of ceaseless ridicule in various media. And once in office, the mockery of his personality, policies, and attitudes multiplied to the point where much of the opposition to Trumpism seemed to have taken the route of comedy, thus giving further support to the view that humor tracks liberal. In May 2017, the *New York Times* reported that "Mr. Trump was the subject of 1,060 jokes from the leading late-night talk-show hosts in his first 100 days in office – far surpassing the number of jokes other recent presidents attracted in their entire first year in office. There were 936 directed at Barack Obama in 2009, and 546 toward George W. Bush in 2001. Bill Clinton had only 440 jokes in 1993" (Deb).

Humor and change – does comedy make anything happen?

After Trump's election, the widespread use of mockery and ridicule targeting him – from Alec Baldwin's impersonation on *Saturday Night Live* to Stephen Colbert's imitations on the *Late Show* – was intended to damage Trump's public image and to undermine his political standing in the world. But has this strategy really paid off? To put it another way: Did the comical "united front" against Trump have any effect in furthering the interests of the anti-Trump coalition, either by discouraging Trump from taking certain actions, by softening his stances, or by forcing him to moderate his temper? One cartoonist suggests an answer (see Figure 1.1).:

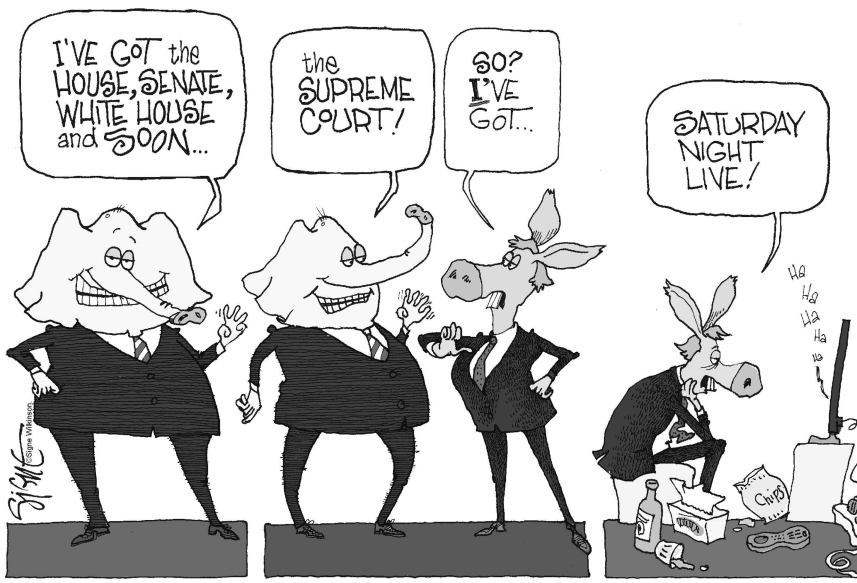

Figure 1.1 A humorous take on the effectiveness of political satire

Source: *Signe Wilkinson Editorial Cartoon*, used with the permission of Signe Wilkinson, the Washington Post Writers Group, and the Cartoonist Group. All rights reserved.

This drawing by Signe Wilkinson humorously undercuts the supposed efficacy of humor as a valid change agent (see Figure 1.1).

But while it may still be too early to determine whether the comical attacks against Trump had any destabilizing effect on the president's political agenda, it is also conceivable that they might have accomplished quite the opposite of their intended purpose. The real effect of the comical anti-Trump coalition may be to provide a safety valve, an outlet for the pent-up frustrations and anxieties of countless liberals who are shocked and exasperated by the political course that Trump's administration has charted. Samantha Bee, whose show *Full Frontal* serves as one of the touchstones of the comical resistance to Trump, said in an interview she "was glad her show could provide an outlet for liberals' frustrations" (Grynbaum and Koblin). Indeed, *The New York Times* described shows like Trevor Noah's *Daily Show* and Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal* as "cathartic" and referred to *Saturday Night Live* as a "comfort food franchise" (Grynbaum and Koblin). Comfort food is not known to fuel revolutions. So, it is quite possible that the wave of anti-Trump comedy has actually sapped some of the energy that could have been directed toward disruptive civic protests, thus acting as a palliative rather than as a fulcrum of resistance, ultimately making it easier for Trump to continue implementing his political agenda undeterred.

Humor and authority

The argument that politically subversive comedy may have a quietistic rather than activist-disruptive effect has been made in other contexts, and it is not a notion to be easily dismissed. For instance, Patrick Merziger's work has turned up evidence that the Nazis actually encouraged people to make jokes about the government, hoping that it would defuse misgivings about the Nazi policies. At first, Germans seemed to be unsure of the risk they would run by telling Nazi jokes, and they tended to exchange them stealthily, hence the term "Flüsterwitz," i.e. "whispered joke." But it soon became apparent that the Nazi leadership not only did not persecute such jokes but actually encouraged them: "The 'whispered jokes' were welcomed by the regime, they were treated with goodwill and amusement, and they were understood as a token of affection from the people" (278). Merziger insists that "In contrast to this picture of a very dark and serious time [from 1933 to 1945], there were more laughs in National Socialism than ever" (281). The joke culture was approved even at the highest levels of the Nazi propaganda machine: "Institutions central to the public face of the National Socialists, including Joseph Goebbels himself, continually stressed the idea of the 'whispered joke' as posing no problem and that it could be permitted in daily life" (279). So, here we have a violent, authoritarian, right-wing regime that approved of people's humor even in cases where the jokes were

directed at themselves. In this situation, the Nazis either thought of humor as a wholly innocuous indulgence, i.e. incapable of inflicting real damage on the existing power structure; or, alternatively, they saw comedy as functioning like a safety valve, an outlet for feelings of anxiety and frustrations, thereby deflecting more subversive energies from manifesting themselves in specific acts of protest or civil disobedience. Whatever the case, Merziger's research reveals that the Nazis apparently did not think of humor as dangerously subversive or critically liberal.

We are accustomed to think that those in power react allergically to manifestations of humor. The 2014 movie *The Interview*, starring Seth Rogan and James Franco, ridiculed North Korea's dictator Kim Jong-un. The Dear Leader reacted with vitriol and barely concealed rage to this work, calling for the wholesale destruction of the United States in retaliation against the comedy. During the heyday of belief in humor's disruptive potential, *Foreign Policy* reported enthusiastically in 2013 about "Laughtivism," or the "strategic use of humor" (Popovic and Joksic) in conflictual situations, notably the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. According to the authors, "laughter is a potent weapon" against corrupt state power and economic hegemony. Certainly, laughter can have this chastising, subversive, and humiliating function, just as Mark Twain believed it did when he famously stated that "against the assault of laughter nothing can stand." The only problem with this line of thinking is that it can be taken to signify that *all* laughter has an anti-authoritarian function, as indicated by Popovic and Joksic: "Pro-democracy demonstrators around the world are discovering that humor is one of the most powerful weapons in the fight against authoritarianism." It may well be that humor's supposedly subversive effect mainly exists in the minds of those enjoying and supporting anti-establishment humor. But the inverse may also be true: i.e. that humor could be used as a tool to secure social and political conformism.

The function of humor under communism can serve as an object lesson in this regard. While Merziger's research uncovered the function of humor in the Nazi era, Christie Davies has investigated humor's role under Soviet communism. As far as Russian jokes about communism go, Davies's research indicates that "even the members of the KGB enjoyed them" (*Humor and Protest* 305). Davies further elaborated on this observation: "It is doubtful whether for present purposes it is helpful to see the political jokes primarily as a weapon (Larsen 1980), as resistance (Zlobin 1996), or as a protective device for the recalcitrant (Waterlow 2013, 224); after all, even those who exercised power enjoyed the jokes (Deriabin and Gibney 1960; Myagkov 1976)" ("Political ridicule" 16). Davies thinks it is possible that in oppressive conditions "jokes are a safety valve that help oppressive regimes to survive and that it is counter-productive to try to suppress them" (*Humor and Protest* 300). Ultimately, Davies rejects the notion that jokes are politically