

Paper

Making Fun of Faith: The Satire of American Sacred Space

Margaret M. Grubiak

Villanova University, Villanova, Pennsylvania
margaret.grubiak@villanova.edu

Summary statement

Prompted by Pope Francis's assertion following the 2015 terror attacks on the French newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* that we "cannot make fun of faith," this paper explores whether and how religious satire has played a productive role in promoting religious pluralism in the United States. Americans often grapple with public displays of religious art and architecture using humor and satire. Graffiti outside the Washington, D.C. Mormon Temple frames the building as something from *The Wizard of Oz*. A mural of Jesus Christ at the University of Notre Dame has been dubbed "Touchdown Jesus" because of its visibility from the football stadium. Reverend Jerry Falwell created his own satire of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Heritage USA theme park in a famous photograph of Falwell descending the park's waterslide in a fundraising ploy. In examining the genesis of each of these satires and how they operate in the give-and-take of religion in the public eye, I argue that religious satire in America promotes religious pluralism. However, this fostering of religious pluralism through satire is limited to various Christian denominations as opposed to different religions writ large, many of which—like Islam and Judaism—remain the subject of religious sacrilege rather than religious satire.

Topic

This paper considers how the "making fun of faith" through the satire of sacred space seeks to integrate religions within American culture.

Scope

When Islamic fundamentalists attacked the offices of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher supermarket in January 2015 claiming seventeen lives, I began to think about the role of religious satire in society. Islamic fundamentalists attacked *Charlie Hebdo* for its depiction in cartoons—some frankly vulgar—of the prophet Muhammad, images of who are forbidden in Islam by a 2001 *fatwa*.¹ Defying Muslim law, *Charlie Hebdo* illustrated the prophet to satirize Islamic fundamentalism, reasoning that once a religion becomes part of political discourse it is fair game for commentary and criticism. Following the attacks, the motto "Je suis Charlie," or "I am Charlie," became a popular display of support for free speech, a seemingly unassailable principle. Yet in a response to the attacks, Pope Francis called into question privileging freedom of speech over freedom of religion. He claimed "there is a limit to free speech" and that we must first respect people's religious beliefs above all else, including our right to free expression. "One cannot provoke, one cannot insult other people's faith," he said, "one cannot make fun of faith."²

The Pope's comments were a direct rebuke of the Western world, particularly the United States, where religious diversity and robust freedom of expression principles combine to produce a culture where the provocation, insulting, and making fun of faith—especially Christianity—is common practice. The wildly successful Broadway play *The Book of Mormon*, the television phenomena *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, and comedian Bill Maher's mockumentary *Religulous*

¹ See Christiane Gruber and Avinoam Shalem, eds., *The Image of the Prophet between Ideal and Ideology: A Scholarly Investigation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

² Elizabeth Dias, "Pope Francis Speaks Out on *Charlie Hebdo*: 'One Cannot Make Fun of Faith,'" *Time* (15 January 2015), <<http://time.com/3668875/pope-francis-charlie-hebdo/>>.

are exemplary parodies of American religion. But religious satire in America is also centered on those religious art and architectural images we encounter, often involuntarily, in our physical world. These images of religion in our American landscape—what I am calling *follies*—are powerful precisely because they enter our field of vision without permission, yet they demand we engage them. What follows is a reciprocal relationship between those institutions that create such images and a fragmented American public that responds in witty, ingenious ways with satire, both gentle and caustic. This paper counters Pope Francis’s claim in the context of religion in the United States, where, I argue, satirizing sacred space plays a productive if imperfect role in promoting the practice of religious pluralism, even if this is limited to an understanding of Christianity.

Case Studies

Three examples of Christian sacred space in America—one Mormon, one Catholic, and one evangelical, all originating in the 1960s and 1970s—illustrate how the satire of sacred buildings promotes religious dialogue in public.

Graffiti outside the Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1968–1974) in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. satirizes the building as something from *The Wizard of Oz* (fig. 1). This graffiti is a way to make sense of a highly visible but inaccessible building—since only Mormons are allowed to enter Mormon temples—by locating the building within a popular culture icon. The graffiti challenges the beliefs of Mormonism while incorporating it within a broader culture.

In a similar way, the so-called “Touchdown Jesus” mural at the University of Notre Dame satirizes Catholicism within popular American culture (fig. 2). The mural, whose real title is “The Word of Life” on the university’s Theodore Hesburgh Library (1963), was intended to celebrate the long tradition of Catholic intellectual thought, but its accidental sightline from the football stadium toward the image of Jesus with his arms outstretched curiously aligns Catholicism with fervent football culture. The image becomes a mixture of the sacred and the profane, challenging the messaging of Catholicism within an image seen by millions on broadcast television.

Finally, the Heritage USA religious theme park opened by Pentecostal televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker in 1978 became the subject of self-satire in an iconic 1987 image of Reverend Jerry Falwell descending the park’s waterslide (fig. 3). Falwell, who went down the slide as part of a fundraising effort, self-consciously knew the production of the image would make fun of this evangelical theme park and enterprise, especially when contrasted against the serious image of Pope John Paul II’s arrival to the United States the very same day. Such satire challenged the mixing of the sacred and the profane—religion and entertainment—in American evangelical culture.

Intended Conclusions

In theorizing what it means to display religion in public, Sally Promey has argued that “the visible display of religion allows individuals and groups to approach and to imagine perspectives different from their own. Visible religion takes on an active cultural role: rehearsing diversity, practicing pluralism.”³ Making fun of religion in public serves this rehearsing of diversity and practicing of pluralism. Satire allows us to locate anxieties about sincere assertions of belief; to evaluate and criticize ways people order their lives that conflict with our own values; to register disagreements with specific religious beliefs and religious power; to assimilate, even if in limited ways, these subcultures; and to begin to understand those who are both different from us and similar to us. These buildings I consider here create a landscape of architectural *follies* that provoke the

³ Sally M. Promey, “The Public Display of Religion” in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, eds. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 48.

public's engagement with religion in these ways. However, I have found only examples related to various Christian denominations, not examples spread across different religions such as Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. While certainly other forms of art and social commentary (e.g. literature, movies, comedy) have undertaken satire of America's minority religions, the physical worship spaces of these religions are more likely to be the object of religious sacrilege, not religious satire.

References

- Berger, Peter. *Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967.
- Bower, Kate. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Brown, Frank Burch. *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Lindvall, Terry. *God Mocks: A History of Religious Satire from the Hebrew Prophets to Stephen Colbert*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Moore, R. Laurence. *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- Morgan, David and Sally Promey. *The Visual Culture of American Religions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Orsi, Robert. *History and Presence*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Plate, S. Brent. *Blasphemy: Art that Offends*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.



Fig. 1. The Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1968–1974), Kensington, Maryland. Photograph by Margaret Grubiak.



Fig. 2. The so-called "Touchdown Jesus" mural (1963–1964) at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana. Photograph by Margaret Grubiak.



Fig. 3. Reverend Jerry Falwell at Heritage USA, Fort Mill, South Carolina, 1987. Associated Press photograph, used under fair use per Wikipedia.org, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jerryfalwellwaterslide.jpg>>.