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## Learning from laughter: Implicit Religion, satire, and power in two British TV situation comedies

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how Implicit Religion might be operationalised in research on popular culture, and specifically on the British TV sitcom. This discussion understands comedy and satire as powerful tools for articulating and contesting stereotypical designations of identity and power within a particular cultural and sociopolitical framework. Where religious characters appear in British TV sitcoms, they are often portrayed as anomalous, hinting at the assumed ‘implicit secularity’ of the audience. However, in the British context, it can be difficult to disentangle religion and the secular. Taking *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994 to 1998) and *Citizen Khan* (2012 to 2016) as case studies, this article compares portrayals of Christian and Muslim communities in British TV sitcoms. This facilitates a discussion of certain double standards in terms of the ways in which these two religious traditions are represented, and what is satirised and ‘taken seriously’ in each case. These double standards are examined with reference to historical differences in status between Christianity and Islam in the British context. This article lays the groundwork for further research on the ways in which humour in popular culture enhances our understanding of operations of Implicit Religion in relation to power within a particular national context.

### KEYWORDS

Satire; humour; secular; Implicit Religion; popular culture; power

By evoking our background knowledge ... our senses of humour reveal ourselves to ourselves, and sometimes to others. (Houck 2016, 4)

### Introduction

When Edward Bailey created Implicit Religion, he opened up countless realms of possibility concerning the role of the implicitly religious in ostensibly ‘non-religious’ areas of life. Since Implicit Religion first appeared in academic discourse in the late 1960s, it has seen many reincarnations. As its ‘rival’, secularisation theory, has been increasingly called into question, Implicit Religion has gained ground. Indeed, as Bailey noted in a later reflection on the

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implications of his model of Implicit Religion, if we apply our knowledge about religious life to the secular, ‘it might turn out that there are elements that we had failed to see, so long as we restricted ourselves to unrelievedly *secular* understandings of the secular’ (Bailey 2012, 196).

Scholars in recent decades have applied Bailey’s model of Implicit Religion far beyond the bounds of traditional, institutionalised religion variously to American environmentalism as ‘implicit Calvinism’ (Nelson 2014), sport as a site of ‘popular passion’ (Collins 2014) and the cult of celebrity (Aruguetem et al. 2014). This article proposes that TV sitcoms, as a popular cultural medium, enact secular understandings of religion while reinforcing certain implicit boundaries concerning what should be taken seriously as central to religious life. In so doing, this research lays the groundwork for further consideration of the ways in which satire in popular culture sheds light on various operations of Implicit Religion in relation to structures of power and meaning that are imagined as secular within a particular national context.

### Implicit Religion and popular culture

In an article entitled ‘Implicit Religion in Popular Culture’, Crome (2015) argues that Implicit Religion’s strength lies in the fact that ‘it asks us to apply the methodological tools of religious studies to . . . realm[s] usually thought of as secular’ (2015, 450). Taking theatre as an example, Grainger (2008) argues that plays act as ‘icons of implicitness’, which ‘don’t say what they mean in the form of explicit messages . . . but communicate implicitly through fictitious events and personages’ (167). In a later article, however, Grainger (2014, 3) concedes that ‘In the presence of theatre it is difficult to be properly academic’ because the work often engenders strong feelings. As in the case of studying religion, ‘actual experience [of theatre] . . . makes it hard for us to stay completely reasonable simply because [it has] a way of grabbing us by the throat’. This is a challenge also noted by scholars of humour, particularly in contexts where harm or offence is felt (Keane 2008).

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed (2014) suggests that emotions act as ‘world making’ cultural politics that move in complex, multidirectional ways, aligning individuals with communities and creating new attachments (Ahmed 2014, 12). Ahmed’s approach complements Bailey’s three central axioms of Implicit Religion; namely, commitment (what a person, group or community is committed to), integrating foci (ritual and material aspects of commitment, such as prayer), and intensive concerns with extensive effects (the ways in which communities or individuals feel compelled to *act* upon their beliefs). Through these axioms, Bailey accommodates dynamic interweavings of commitment at the individual and communal emotional levels. Popular culture provides a fruitful lens through which to explore collective and individual experiences that engage beliefs and values within a particular cultural context.

### Implicit Religion through the lens of humour

In his analysis of the films of Christopher Nolan, theologian George Faithful argues that ‘explicit and implicit claims about the ultimate nature of reality’ can be drawn from speculative fiction (Faithful 2014, 405). He later goes on to add that:

By discerning the themes and ideas implicit in [science fiction] texts, we consumers . . . may hope to better understand and learn from the values in which we have immersed ourselves in the context of a narrative, whether or not we personally adhere to those values. (Faithful 2014, 415)

This claim resonates with various theories of humour as a social, meaning-making phenomenon, through which values and cultural categories are played out (Golozubov 2014). Indeed, in an article for the journal *Implicit Religion*, Heddendorf (2004, 147) suggests that ‘As worldviews, religion and humour bring some order into a world of disorder’. The notion of an affinity between humour and religion as categories adds another dialogical dimension to this article, in which humour – as a social, meaning-making process – can *itself* be understood as a kind of variation on the category of Implicit Religion. Sociologist David Feltmate takes this claim further, advocating for ‘seeing humour as a means of grace and acceptance – as a way of connecting us to some transcendent reality beyond our socially constructed conflicts’ (Feltmate 2013, 231). In the context of Implicit Religion, this approach is invaluable; the sociality of humour does not negate its potential to convey deeper truths along Bailey’s axiomatic lines. Looking at Implicit Religion through the lens of humour – and vice versa – provides a fruitful space in which to explore the dynamics of power that operate within and around the categories of religion and humour alike.

This being said, there is strikingly little research exploring humour and satire within the field of religious studies as a whole.<sup>1</sup> This is, perhaps, because humour is often understood as something mundane, ‘non-academic’ or simply too subjective to analyse. It might also be explained in terms of the perceived irreverence and ‘implicit secularity’ of humour as a communicative framework (Sharma 2011, 41). In a recent study of religion and humour in several well-known American animated sitcoms, Feltmate (2017) shapes his analysis around three questions: ‘What do you have to believe about . . . the role of “religion” in society to find jokes in these sitcoms humorous?’; ‘What do these patterns tell us about popular constructions of religion’s significance?’; and ‘What can a critical analysis of religion in popular culture communicate about civil life?’ (Feltmate 2017, 4). Feltmate’s questions provide a useful framework in which to assess the functions of humorous representations of religion sociologically. In this article, however, the role of religion as a category will be explored through Bailey’s terms, placing a particular emphasis on the ways in which the integrating foci and extensive affects of two religious traditions (namely, Christianity and Islam) are humorously portrayed in British popular culture.

In *Religious Affects*, Schaefer (2015, 67) understands humour as one of the ‘chunky raw materials’ that materialise ‘the contact zone between bodies and worlds – the membrane between bodies and power’. This resonates with the work of various social theorists discussing humour and satire. Bergson (1911) argues that humour can act as a ‘social corrective’, in that being laughed at generates feelings of exclusion and humiliation. Conversely, being laughed *with* generates feelings of solidarity and acceptance (Golozubov 2014). Thus, comedy and satire have the potential to affirm or to contest designations of power and status (Billig 2005), to inspire political action or to mollify the discontented subject (Davis 1995), and so on. The funniness of the ‘in-joke’ derives from the fact that it plays into certain pre-existing cultural categories. As Hoover and Lundby (1997, 147) note, a satirical representation operates collectively ‘only to the extent that the audience subscribes to [its] symbolic constructions’.

As a result, humour *can* have a kind of 'legitimizing force, strengthening the authoritative quality of power' and maintaining certain framings of inclusion and exclusion (Zijderveld 1983, 55).<sup>2</sup>

Woodhead's characterisation of religion as 'the place where a society holds up an image of itself, reaffirms its bonds, renews its emotional ties, and marks its boundaries' (Woodhead 2011, 127) resonates, in some respects, with the category of humour as set out above. At the same time, the categories of humour and religion remain distinct in the sense that, while religion tends to be visibly engaged with processes of meaning making, humour often appears (at face value, at least) irreverent, innocuous, and transient to its audience.

### Implicit Religion and humour in the British context

Cultural productions within the typically secular, irreverent context of British TV sitcoms<sup>3</sup> might contribute to a broader discussion of categories such as religion and the secular in this national framework. It is beyond the scope of this article to map out in detail the various and shifting places of religion in British society. However, it is worth noting that while, historically, Christianity held a 'cultural monopoly' within the British context (Martin 2005; Chapman, Maltby, and Whyte 2011), contemporary British society is marked by increased religious diversity (Woodhead and Catto 2012) and a gradual process of 'cultural secularization' (Mol 1976). Having said this, as Oliphant compellingly argues, what is 'implicit' varies enormously depending on national, political, and socioeconomic context (Oliphant 2015, 2019), and can be challenging to identify. In Western Europe, religion (specifically Christianity) often continues to represent an 'unmarked' but 'protected' category (Oliphant 2019). Indeed, part of the power of religion as an 'unmarked category' is rooted in its ability to blend in as implicit. In the British context, various historians and sociologists of religion argue that Christianity remains the privileged religion, both in terms of its relationship to the state establishment (e.g. faith-based state schools, the monarchy) and its unmarked acceptance as part of the 'British tradition' (Chapman, Maltby, and Whyte 2011; Engelke 2013).

Finally, before turning to the case studies, it is worth briefly noting the function of humour as a social signifier in the British context. Cultural theorist Andy Medhurst argues that humour is often seen, in the British context, as an indicator of humility, intelligence, and friendliness (Medhurst 2007). If humour can be understood as an important social marker in the British context, it serves as a promising and undervalued analytical lens through which to engage with contemporary formulations of the categories of religion and secular in the cultural zone of popular entertainment, which we can consider as a microcosm of the British imaginary more generally.<sup>4</sup>

### The case studies: *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Citizen Khan*

In this article, the approaches to Implicit Religion and humour outlined in the previous section will guide the analysis of the two case studies, namely *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994 to 1998) and *Citizen Khan* (2012 to 2016). These case studies were chosen for comparative analysis due to a number of structural similarities; both were produced and broadcast by the BBC in twenty-minute episodes, set in southern England (unlike other otherwise relevant examples such as *Father Ted*), and ran for similar timespans.

*The Vicar of Dibley* is a British sitcom, which originally ran from 1994 to 1998, with occasional reprises for ‘Winter Specials’ until 2015. The critically acclaimed show follows the lives of villagers in the fictional Oxfordshire town of Dibley, and, in particular, the plights of Geraldine Granger, the town’s first female vicar, as she is gradually accepted into the Dibley community. In the show, the vicar and her colleagues navigate the grey areas between the religious and the profane, in a manner that presupposes a certain level of insider knowledge of Christian beliefs and practices (or commitments and integrating foci) from the audience.

*Citizen Khan* follows the lives of the Muslim ‘community leader’ Mr Khan and his family in Sparkhill, an inner-city area of Birmingham. Unlike *Vicar of Dibley*, which received a positive critical reception from the outset, *Citizen Khan* sparked controversy when it first aired. In the tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail*, the headlines read ‘Heavily made-up girl in a hijab provokes storm of complaints as BBC is accused of insulting Muslims with new sitcom Citizen Khan’ (Revoir 2012). In other broadsheet newspapers, *Citizen Khan* was labelled ‘racist’ (Sherwin 2012), ‘Islamophobic’, ‘embarrassing’ and ‘old-fashioned’ (Tate 2014). One scene in particular in the first episode garnered considerable criticism. In this scene, Mr Khan goes to check on his daughter Alia in her room. As he enters the room, she puts away her phone, rushes to put on the *hijab* and starts bowing before the Qur’an, in a ‘holy charade’ for her father (Lais 2012), to hearty laughter from the show’s live audience. This ‘charade’, which occurs repeatedly between Alia and her father throughout the sitcom, was criticised for desacralising sacred Islamic texts and practices. In defence of the show, its writer Adil Ray pointed out that he is a British Asian Muslim himself, and writes from an inclusive position of affectionate familiarity with the Sparkhill community.

### **Religious ritual and doctrine as satirical content: a sign of ‘implicit secularity’?**

In both *Vicar of Dibley* and *Citizen Khan*, the categories of religion and ritual are framed as part of the everyday and subjected to ‘cheap jokes’. This reformulation correlates with narratives aligned with ‘implicit secularity’ (Sharma 2011, 41), in which the importance of religious commitment in people’s lives is marginalised or diminished. In particular, in *Citizen Khan*, the practice of prayer within Islam is the subject of numerous jibes. In one episode, Mr Khan draws an analogy between Allah and the ‘ultimate mobile phone service provider’ who gives ‘unlimited talk time, always a good signal and pray as you go’, to which his son-in-law responds, ‘What network is he on?’ Here, the notion of ‘speaking to God’ is satirised via its reframing in secular, material terms.<sup>5</sup> In the same episode, Mr Khan and his colleague Dave watch various mosque members perform the call to prayer in increasingly ridiculous ways (whispering, with guitar, out of tune, ‘forgetting the words’). While Dave and Mr Khan appear dismayed as these desacralising enactments of the call to prayer, the live audience laughs heartily, in a sense legitimising this desacralisation.

Likewise, when Mr Khan’s mother-in-law (Nanni) visits, she begins preparing to pray in the living room. Mr Khan becomes increasingly incensed by her behaviour because he wants to go to the mosque. Eventually, the scene culminates in Mr Khan exclaiming, ‘you’re facing the wrong way’, before grabbing Nanni’s prayer mat and spinning it around to face Mecca, as she indignantly rebukes him. In another scene, Mr Khan jibes again at his mother-in-law’s propensity for untimely prayer, stating that she prays ‘every

five minutes' and 'God must be sick of the sight of her'. In these scenes, Mr Khan is, in a sense, portrayed as the butt of the joke, with his bad-tempered attitude, but his treatment of the practice of prayer is simultaneously legitimised as 'funny'. This translation of the moment of prayer into a subject of satire indicates that this ritual performance of faith need not be taken seriously.

One final example of this translation of religious practice into something profane comes in a later episode of the show, where Mr Khan proposes to organise a 'Muslim fun day', and suggests that this should include a 'bouncy mosque'. He explains that 'a bouncy mosque is just like any other mosque; you have to take your shoes off . . . and it helps you get higher and closer to God'. Again, while, in a sense, the symbolism of the mosque within the Islamic tradition is summarised here, it is framed in the language of the 'bouncy castle', a secular party feature, which has childish and fantastical connotations. This thus serves as another example of the integrating foci of the Islamic tradition being satirised. In a discussion of Implicit Religion and mediated public ritual, Ronald L. Grimes identifies a potential paradox; 'On the one hand, ritual is used as a synonym for religion and the sacred; on the other, it is identified as anything routine, patterned or stylized' (Grimes 2002, 228). In the examples discussed above, this apparent contradiction becomes visible through incongruous representations of sacred rituals resituated in everyday contexts.

In *The Vicar of Dibley*, various Christian doctrines are also reimagined within the context of contemporary secular culture. For example, in the opening episode of *The Vicar of Dibley*, the Vicar, when speaking to the church verger Alice, likens Jesus to a contender on the popular quiz show *Mastermind*. The vicar, playing both quizmaster and contestant, narrates: 'Name: Jesus, Profession: Saviour of mankind, specialist category: catering' as Alice bursts into fits of laughter. As in *Citizen Khan*, when the practice of prayer is translated into something comedic and Allah into the 'ultimate phone service provider', here we see the figure of Jesus being assimilated into the secular, everyday contemporary context of a popular TV show. The question of how the repositioning of religious scripture within a contemporary, satirical context operates remains open. It might be argued that, in both *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Citizen Khan*, the absorption of various integrating foci of religion into the medium of satire reflects the devaluing of these practices, and presupposes the 'implicit secularity' of the audience. Having said this, for this humour to work<sup>6</sup> also demands a certain level of implicit insider knowledge of the religious tradition.

### ***Insider knowledge: subversion of Christian 'cultural monopoly'?***

In *Citizen Khan*, references to the Islamic tradition remain quite general, mirroring the kinds of tropes that often feature in mainstream media representations of Islamic practice (daily prayers, the wearing of the *hijab*, a fairly narrow sketch of what it means to pursue a *halal* lifestyle).<sup>7</sup> By contrast, in *The Vicar of Dibley*, time and again, specific references are made to Christian scripture. On one level, this can perhaps be understood in the context of the culturally privileged position of the Christian tradition in the British context. Indeed, even the show's opening credits bear traces of this

narrative of ‘Christian Britain’ – each episode begins with a choral recording of the traditional hymn ‘The Lord is My Shepherd’ playing over aerial panning shots of the rolling hills and fields of rural England.

At the same time, however, this knowledge is sometimes juxtaposed with rather unexpected or even puerile punchlines. For example, Geraldine refers glibly to Jesus walking on water, saying ‘they said to Jesus, you can’t walk on water, you’ll get your dress wet . . . but he did!’ In another scene, the vicar exclaims, tongue in cheek, ‘you can’t even covet your neighbour’s ass, even if it is very alluring’. In both cases, the success of the joke depends on the audience recognising the specific Biblical reference being made, while at the same time subverting the traditional seriousness and sacrality of scripture. In this respect, *The Vicar of Dibley* follows, to some extent, in the tradition of the various surrealist sketch shows and films released by the *Monty Python* comedy group between 1969 and 1983, such as the film *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), which satirically reimagines a range of central doctrines and tenets of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> At the time of its release, this film received a mixed reception. For some, the film represented a well-researched and creative engagement with New Testament studies. For others, it trivialised the tale of the birth of Jesus. It received many favourable written reviews, but also provoked hostile reactions by members of organised Christian groups who picketed screenings of the film (Wiersma 2012). This speaks volumes about the dualities of meaning in satire, which have extensive effects when religious communities feel compelled to react (through picketing or protests). To return to Oliphant’s theoretical framework, the controversy of this film seems to derive partly from its demarcating of the previously ‘unmarked’ category of Christianity as something ‘up for debate’ and even ridicule. At the same time, however, it is at least in part because the Christian nativity story is so widely known in Britain that *Life of Brian* was commercially successful.

Earlier in this article, we saw how humour can be theorised as expressing various dynamics of power pertaining to insider/outsider status. Moving deeper into analysis of *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Citizen Khan* illuminates some of the complex ways in which these dynamics can intersect – the sacred may be rendered ‘profane’ for laughs but this laughter derives, in a sense, from the audience’s insider recognition of the subversiveness of desacralising religious commitments and practices. This recognition depends on taking religion (to some extent) seriously; otherwise, there would be no real sense of transgression. In order to clarify the power dynamics at play in *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Citizen Khan*, it is helpful to take this analysis of how religious commitment and integrating foci are represented one step further.

### ***Taking religion seriously? Power and ‘unlaughter’***

One notable difference between framings of the categories of religion and the sacred in the two sitcoms is that, in *Vicar of Dibley*, religion is, at times, taken more seriously. If comedy can serve to reify the status quo and express differences in status between social groups, the extent to which Muslim and Christian beliefs and practices are taken seriously as ‘marked’ or ‘unmarked’ categories (Oliphant 2019) is noteworthy, bringing us around full circle to questions of power and status.

In *The Vicar of Dibley*, there is an unspoken boundary in terms of how far Christian doctrine can be ridiculed. Thinking back to Oliphant's idea of 'unmarked categories' and Christianity's historical 'cultural monopoly' in Britain (Woodhead and Catto 2012; Martin 2005), this reflects the implicit respect in which the Christian tradition is held in the British context. The Vicar, as a likeable, dynamic protagonist and proponent of Christian faith (and as a woman, reflecting the 'modernising' of the Church), offers a favourable representation of the Christian tradition. For example, in a Christmas special, the Vicar tells the church meeting that they need to think about how to recreate 'The greatest story ever told'. The other characters respond by suggesting 'great stories' such as Beatrix Potter, to hearty laughter from the live audience. However, the Vicar interrupts, sternly demanding, 'Can we just stop right there?' The laughter immediately subsides as the Vicar declares, with fervour:

I believe that baby boy was actually the Son of God and when he was younger than I am today, he was brutally crucified for simply telling people to love each other. And here we are, 2000 years later, doing a play about his birth.

She concludes, 'Now I think that's a pretty great story', and all the other characters remain silent and contemplative, nodding in humble agreement. In this moment, Bailey's axioms of commitment and intensive concerns with extensive effects come into sharp relief. We are told that this is a story that must be taken seriously, that underpins the religious tradition that this community is committed to and which the characters feel compelled to enact through the celebration of Christmas.<sup>9</sup>

To build on Moira Smith's model of 'unlaughter' as a mode of boundary maintenance, it might be argued that in these scenes in *The Vicar of Dibley*, by delimiting particular dimensions of the Christian tradition as 'serious', a certain power is ascribed to this tradition, which 'constructs exclusion as much as inclusion' (Smith 2009, 150). In another episode, the church council need to replace a stained-glass window in the church and debate what to put in its place. Throughout the episode, various 'ridiculous' options are put forward, but eventually, the vicar opts for placing a normal window in the church, allowing the congregation to see the view outside. In a moment of genuine poignancy, one character declares that she thinks the new window is 'Bloody marvellous; I mean, you can't beat God's own creation, can you?' Here, the myth of creation within the Christian tradition is invoked. Furthermore, in a motif that recurs throughout the programme, the Vicar speaks to an icon of Jesus on the wall of her home. While she speaks in 'informal' language, asking Jesus to 'lend a hand' and addressing him, in one Christmas episode, as the 'birthday boy', there is also a moment in each of these scenes in which the audience's laughter subsides, and the Vicar's plea for help appears genuine. Each of these scenes is shot in dim candlelight, adding to their 'sacred' atmosphere. The sacrality of these scenes is given added credibility by the fact that the Vicar's prayers are answered by the end of the episode. To put this in the terms of Bailey's axioms of Implicit Religion, the Vicar is compelled by her religious commitment to carry out the act of prayer, which has extensive effects within the community and in her own spiritual life.

By contrast, in *Citizen Khan*, there are no such moments of taking Islam seriously. Adil Ray has defended the show, stating that 'being able to take a joke' is a mark of empowerment and open dialogue. Furthermore, Ray underlines that the show satirises not only practices within the Islamic tradition but also cultural norms within the

Pakistani community in Sparkhill. This dimension is lacking in *The Vicar of Dibley*, which treats the cultural traditions of its fictionalised village in rural England as an ‘unmarked category’. If the lack of representation of Islam in British popular culture until the 2000s can be understood in terms of the ‘invisibility’ of the Islamic tradition, it might be argued Ray’s show serves to bring this tradition visibility as a ‘marked category’ that can be teased from an insider perspective.

In ‘The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere’, Kuipers (2011) notes the existence of a ‘discourse of humourless Muslims’ in Europe and the USA (75). She argues that this discourse denotes the social exclusion of Muslims along two lines: first, ‘not having a sense of humour is associated with (strict) religiosity’ set in opposition to so-called ‘modern personhood’ (76); second, marginalised groups often ‘lack the power to initiate or respond appropriately to humour, leading others to see them as humourless’ (75). In this context, *Citizen Khan* might be interpreted as a step towards providing a ‘culturally significant space’ (Michael 2011, 152) within popular culture and, specifically, comedy, in which the representation of ‘humourless’ Islam can be contested. However, in terms of giving credibility to Islamic beliefs and practices, the show seems to fall short.

## Conclusions

Comedy remains a highly ambiguous analytical field. This article has gone some way towards indicating possible future directions for research into engagements with Implicit Religion through the lens of humour and satire in popular culture. While one should be wary of drawing wholesale conclusions about such a complex topic, this article makes use of Oliphant’s framework of ‘marked’ and ‘unmarked’ categories of religion to argue tentatively that humour and satire illuminate certain framings of religion, in terms of what is and is not deemed ‘acceptable’ content for satire and how this satire operates. While both *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Citizen Khan* function, in a sense, from an insider perspective, the degree to which religion is taken seriously differs significantly. This reflects the social and cultural positioning of the two religious traditions represented. While *Citizen Khan* portrays a community practising a minority religion often labelled as ‘humourless’ (Kuipers 2011), *The Vicar of Dibley* depicts a religion often taken seriously as a part of British cultural tradition. As a result, the representations of the commitment, integrating foci and intensive concerns with extensive effects of the two traditions differ in tone and impact.

Let us close now by bringing this discussion back to a more general theorisation of the ways in which an analysis of humour and satire in popular culture might enhance our understanding of Implicit Religion. While one might, at first glance, imagine that viewing religion humorously is symptomatic of the prevalence of secularism as an ‘unmarked category’, on closer examination, it can be argued that the rhetorics of humour concerning religion in popular culture in general (and in TV sitcoms in particular) are emblematic of a new vocabulary of Implicit Religion in dialogue with the secular, a kind of (potentially) constructive ‘scrambling of the sacred and profane’ (Santana and Erickson 2008, 4). Comedy, satire and further ‘humour regimes’ (Kuipers 2011), whether in TV sitcoms or other cultural mediums, represent a promising field for further research in relation to power dynamics within the ‘marked’ and ‘unmarked’ categories of Implicit Religion.

## Notes

1. One recent exception to this rule is Wilcox's (2018) *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism and Serious Parody*, an ethnographic study bringing queerness, religious activism, and satire into fruitful dialogue.
2. See also Smith's (2009) exploration of the function of 'unlaughter' in boundary maintenance.
3. In this theorisation of irreverence in British popular culture, I am influenced by Bignell's reflections in *Popular Television Drama: Critical Perspectives* (Bignell and Lacey 2005).
4. For a further discussion of the intersections between national imaginaries, media entertainment, and cultural identity, see Bondebjerg (2008).
5. Interestingly, a similar metaphor crops up in the British-Irish sitcom *Father Ted*, when Father Ted Crilly explains to simpleminded priest Father McGuire: 'Old women are closer to God than we'll ever be. They get to that age and they don't need the operator anymore. They've got the direct line.'
6. Here, I use 'work' in the literal sense of serving its purpose but also keeping in mind Ahmed's (2014) theorisation of the dynamic work that emotions do. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed (2014) suggests that 'emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place' (10). These emotions do not 'stay still', however, but 'move, stick and slide' constantly as they work in different ways on the subject (14).
7. For a comprehensive analysis of representations of Muslims in the British media, see Petley and Richardson (2011) *Pointing the Finger: Islam and Muslims in the British Media*.
8. For a closer analysis of this example, see Taylor's (2015) *Jesus and Brian: exploring the historical Jesus and his time via Monty Python's Life of Brian*.
9. It is worth noting that the popular sitcoms *The Office* (2001–2003), *Gavin and Stacey* (2007–2019), and cult sitcom *Peep Show* (2003–2015) engage in more confronting or 'desacralizing' terms with the nativity story in their Christmas specials. For example, in the final Christmas special of *The Office*, the narcissistic protagonist Brent compares himself to Jesus, stating:
 

I don't look upon this like it's the end, I look upon it like it's moving on you know. It's almost like my work here's done. I can't imagine Jesus going, 'Oh, I've told a few people in Bethlehem I'm the son of God, can I just stay here with Mum and Dad now?' No. You gotta move on. You gotta spread the word. You gotta go to Nazareth, please. And that's, very much like... me.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Lucy Spoliar* is currently completing a Research Masters in Religion and Culture at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. Her research interests centre on representations of religion and gender in film, media, and popular culture.

## The sitcoms

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