

## Comedy and Religion

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

*...religion's greatest trick wasn't convincing people that there was a God who was all-powerful. It was convincing everyone else that you couldn't ridicule the idea.* – British Comedian and Atheist Ricky Gervais

Despite the popular notion that religion should be deadly serious, the fact remains that religion is downright hilarious. Indeed, CBS has premiered the sitcom *Living Biblically*, and comedies such as CBS' *Young Sheldon* have dealt with religion intelligently and in funny ways. *Living Biblically* features the character Chip trying to dedicate his life to living according to biblical principles. Chip is advised by a rabbi and a Catholic priest. The writers for the show consist of nonbelievers as well as the deeply religious. The main lesson of the show is that Christianity means different things to different people. There is no one way to be a good Christian. Interpretation is everything.

The main lesson of the show is problematic. If there is a perfect God that wants us to live morally, there must be some clearly stated high standards to which we must all be held accountable.

Trying to live biblically in modern times is incredibly challenging, if not impossible. For example, the Bible clearly condemns homosexuality (Lev. 18-22) and commands the death penalty for men engaged in same-sex relations. In this day and age of same-sex weddings and LGBTQI rights, it's a challenge just opposing homosexuality.

The Bible is all about patriarchy (Gen. 3:15-16.) To live biblically, we would have to regard women as the property of men and deprive them of human rights. That would be the best way to please the hyper-masculine biblical God.

Living biblically would mean condoning slavery (1 Tim, 6:1-4), distrusting Jews (1 Thess. 2:15-16) and stoning people to death. We would have to honor our mothers and fathers, even if they are abusive. None of this seems to make for good humor.

However, there could be humor elsewhere. The Bible condemns fornication, but most Christians today don't even seem to know what the word means. Indeed, in his excellent book *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage and Sex*, Mark Regnerus shows just how much sexuality has changed over the years. For example, only between 11%-12% of males and females wait until marriage to have sex. Adultery – which was also punishable by death – is also a major challenge nowadays. Lust – one of the seven deadly sins – is a natural urge. Yet Pope Paul II once famously stated that even if a man lusts after his own wife, he has committed adultery! Throw the widespread use of porn into the mix, and all kinds of hilarity is likely to ensue. (Masturbation, another sin in which most males and many females indulge, always draws big laughs.)

There are also certain kinds of food that religionists are prohibited from eating, such as pork and shellfish. Living in a wealthy, capitalist society with a wide variety of advertisements, choices and temptations of food can bring forth many funny situations, and the deadly sin of gluttony has been drawing horse laughs for years.

Then there are the religious prohibitions against alcohol consumption and illicit drugs. No one has done illicit drug comedy better than the great Cheech and Chong on the silver screen. (Incidentally, Tommy Chong played a great burnout on the TV hit *That '70s Show*, which brilliantly made fun of illicit drug use.) Who can forget the immortal line in one Cheech and Chong movie in which one character who found religion remarked, "I used to be all fucked up on drugs. Now, I'm all fucked up on the Lord"?

Coveting your neighbor's property (including his wife) is a major sin. However, the entire U.S. economy is run on envy and keeping up with the Joneses. If comedy writers can't coax funny jokes out of that sin, they are in the wrong line of work.

Highlighting biblical contradictions, inconsistencies, absurdities and atrocities makes for great humor. Moreover, noting Christian hypocrisy is easy and elicits many laughs. On the latter point, I remember one Thanksgiving when some friends of mine were smoking herb and drinking hard liquor. We went upstairs to "bless the food" and one friend gave a highly impressive prayer. Everyone was blown away and congratulated him on a job well done. They then got back to the business of drinking and drugging as they continued to rave about the prayer.

Just last week I was at a club in which someone grabbed the mike and angrily insisted that we all be quiet so that we could bless the food. After the food was blessed, everyone got back to listening to foul-mouthed music, drinking alcohol to excess and trying to hook up sexually, just as the good Lord intended.

There have been numerous comedians that have delivered brilliant religious humor. They include Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby, George Carlin, Sam Kinison, Flip Wilson, Eddie Griffin and others. Chris Rock has some excellent religious humor in his Netflix special *Tamborine* (spelled without the “u”.)

Bible humor practically writes itself. However, religious fanatics realized from the beginning that religious jokes – even the corny ones – plant seeds of religious doubt. As the seeds grow, they break the shackles of religion.

Let’s all applaud biblical humor, and perhaps we should all try our hands at it. There is plenty of material for would-be comedians. Indeed, as Voltaire remarked of the Bible, “There is something laughable on every page.”