

Religion and sense of humor: An a priori incompatibility? Theoretical considerations from a psychological perspective

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Abstract

Although humor is not absent from religion, one may wonder whether religion's historical mistrust of the comic is not accidental, but reflects a deeper reality. Based on theory and research on both psychology of humor and psychology of religion, as well as on the psychological anthropology of early Christianity, the present paper inspects the ways in which religion is related to personality traits, cognitive structures and social consequences associated with sense of humor. Not unexpectedly, the conclusion suggests, from a personality psychology perspective, an a priori negative association between religiousness and sense of humor.

Introduction

No doubt exists that humor is present in religion. Scholars from different fields have explored humor in Biblical texts (e.g., Jónson 1965; Radday and Brenner 1990), in the life of holy figures such as Christ and the saints (Jacques and Kervyn 1938; Leclerq 1959; Trueblood 1964), and in religions other than Christianity (e.g., Hyers 1974; see Gilhus 1997, for an historical overview). It has also been argued that comic and tragic views vary between religions (Morreall 1997).

Neither is there any doubt that the humor present in religion has specific functions, and some interesting work has recently been done on this from an anthropological (Apte 1985) and sociological (Davies 1998) perspective.

Interestingly, relationships between humor and religion have not been studied, either theoretically or empirically, from a psychological

perspective. The present paper, however, is not interested in the *presence* and *function* of humor in a religious context, but rather in whether it can be argued that religion may *influence* the sense of humor, and this in the negative, intuitive, direction, or at least whether religiousness¹ may *be associated* with low propensity for humor.

We are of course aware of recent theoretical attempts to valorize positive links between the comic and religion from a theological, religious, or spiritual point of view (e.g., Berger 1997; Hyers 1996; Kuschel 1994). Gilhus (1997) reported that in some modern (charismatic) religious groups laughter is even promoted as a form of therapy.

Nevertheless, an empirical science such as psychology should be prudent as to whether the reality of everyday life fits these theoretical, theological and ideological assertions. A deeper historical examination of the relationship between religion and the comic seems to justify the intuitive hypothesis of religion's suspicion of laughter and humor, and many scholars from different disciplines have demonstrated this historical mistrust (e.g., Eco 1983; Hausherr 1944; Le Goff 1990, 1997; Ménager 1995).

One might wonder, for instance, why Christ didn't simply say "blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh" (Lk 6: 21), but went on to add "woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep" (Lk 6: 25). Consequently, and independently of the possible presence of humor in a religious context, a social science scholar might be interested not in whether Jesus ever laughed, but why for two thousands years people thought he didn't.

A promising way to investigate the possible incompatibility between humor and religion seems to be to inspect how religion is associated with personality traits, cognitive structures and social attitudes which are theoretically considered to be characteristic of, or empirically found to be associated with, humor. This comparison is legitimate because both humor (Ruch 1998) and religiousness (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997) can be considered as characteristics of personality.

Incongruity, ambiguity, and nonsense

Humor

In strictly cognitive terms humor is defined, at least partially, by perception (Nerhardt 1996) and enjoyment (Morreall 1989) of

incongruity. More generally, as Berger's (1997) revision of theories from different human and social sciences demonstrated, this incongruity reflects the wider anthropological incongruity of human existence. The comic is a celebration of the contradictions of human life, such as those between effort and result, capacity and ambition, intention and external accident (Hegel), expectation and disappointment (Kant), life and matter (Bergson), and the experience of both being and possessing a body (Plessner).

The comic is a celebration of the contradictions inherent to people and life: "Man's eccentric position allows man to perceive the world as both constrained and open, as familiar and strange, as meaningful and meaningless" (Berger 1997: 48). In these terms, humor is marked by the ambiguity and limits of meaning. Studying the importance that the transgression of rules of rationality holds in humor, Freud even wondered whether every joke isn't a nonsense joke (1960 [1905]: 158).

Beyond a play with ambiguity and the limits of meaning, humor seems to point towards the possibility of nonsense. In ancient Greek literature, Hippocrates describes the fictive case of Democritus, who lost his mind and laughed continually without measure and reason, as follows: "He remains awake night and day, finding in big and small things so many subjects of mirth, deeming that *the whole of life is nothing*" (Hippocrate 1989: 38, our italics and trans.). More recently, Kundera, the famous Czech novelist, defines the difference between the comic and tragic as the following: "By providing us with the lovely illusion of human greatness, the tragic brings us consolation. The comic is crueler: it brutally reveals the meaninglessness of everything" (1988: 126).

Empirically, it is now well established that humor is negatively associated with close-mindedness. For instance, people high in dogmatism perceive themselves as not very humorous (Dixon et al. 1986) and need more time to recognize humor than people low in dogmatism (Miller and Bacon 1971; but see Smith and Levenson 1976). Openness, a factor of the Five Factor Model of personality, predicts cheerfulness, low seriousness, both quantity and quality of humor "on demand" (Ruch and Köhler 1998), reported use of humor as coping (Costa et al. 1996; McCrae and Costa 1986), and self-perception as humorous vs. diplomatic (Saucier and Goldberg 1998). In addition, intolerance of ambiguity (Ruch 1992) and low Openness (Ruch and Hehl 1998) predict a preference for incongruity-resolution over nonsense humor and need for cognitive closure predicts low sense of humor (Saroglou and Scariot

2002). Finally, authoritarianism is negatively related to sense of humor and perspective-taking humor (Lefcourt 1996; Lefcourt and Shepherd 1995).

Religion

While the search for meaning is universal to all human beings, independent of religious belief, religion is particularly preoccupied by the search for meaning. For instance, religion is looking for answers where “objectively” there is no information (origin-end of the human being and the world). Many scholars consider this need for meaning fundamental to religious people (e.g., Hood et al. 1996), and furthermore, that religion is characterized by a need for the reduction of uncertainty (e.g., Schwartz and Huismans 1995). We may assume that the fundamental, integrating and unifying character of religious faith may be responsible for a certain tendency to close-mindedness.

Although one might expect that religious ideals of tolerance and altruism would prevent close-mindedness, empirical research overall seems to confirm the tendency for low openness (see Saroglou and Jaspard 2000). For example, in a number of studies with people of various religious denominations in a variety of countries, religious people systematically placed great importance on values of Conformity, Tradition, and Security (Burris and Tarpley 1998; Schwartz and Huismans 1995).

Not unexpectedly, *religious fundamentalism* is strongly associated with authoritarianism (Altemeyer 1996), dogmatism (Hunsberger et al. 1996), low Openness (Streyffeler and McNally 1998), prejudice (Altemeyer 1996; Hunsberger 1996), and low integrative complexity of thinking on religious issues (Pancer et al. 1995). The problem is that (intensity of) *religiosity per se* also, regardless of fundamental versus liberal stances, seems to be generally, although not systematically, associated with a certain close-mindedness. This is the case with authoritarianism (Leak and Randall 1995; Wylie and Forest 1992), dogmatism (Francis 1997, for review), prejudice (Batson et al. 1993), need for cognitive closure (Saroglou in press-a), and low Openness (Saucier and Goldberg 1998; Saroglou 2002, for review). Although some studies did not confirm this tendency (e.g., Francis 1997; Kosek 1999), no study in the last decade, to our knowledge, has demonstrated a positive association between religion and open-mindedness.²

It seems reasonable to suspect that religion may not be attracted to a celebration of incongruity, ambiguity and, most importantly, possibility of nonsense. In more strictly cognitive terms, one may hypothesize that the perception, or at least enjoyment, of incongruity is not encouraged by religion.³

Playfulness

Humor

Besides incongruity, playfulness is considered as a supplementary condition for humor. In order to be perceived as humorous, incongruity needs to be perceived in a secure, playful framework (Suls 1983). More generally, humor shares many aspects with play, although some differences exist between the two (see e.g., Berger 1997; Freud 1905). The criteria defined by Piaget (1945) in order to distinguish play from non-playful activities, criteria that Berlyne (1969) reiterates in a chapter entitled *Laughter, humor, and play*, can also be applied to humor: play 1) is an end in itself; 2) is spontaneous; 3) is an activity for pleasure; 4) has a relative lack of organization; 5) is free from conflicts; 6) is overmotivated.

Empirically, the few existing studies confirm an association between playfulness and humor. Need for play predicts appreciation of nonsense and sexual humor (Ruch and Hehl 1993) and is associated positively and negatively with the temperament traits of cheerfulness and seriousness respectively (Ruch and Köhler 1998).

Several of Piaget's above-mentioned criteria can be found in the theoretical work on humor of recent scholars. Humor, like play which has an end in itself, is gratuitous, unforeseeable, contrary to seriousness, which is useful, important and reliable (Defays 1996). Moreover, humor seems to be located in an area beyond the distinction of good and evil: it implies an "arrest of moral judgment" (Cazamian 1906). (This does not mean that laughter and humor have no ethical and social-ethical consequences.) In addition, humor implies an "arrest of affective judgment" (Cazamian 1906), a kind of "momentary anesthesia of the heart" (Bergson 1911 [1905]). Freud also observed that "the comic feeling comes easiest in more or less indifferent cases where the feelings and interests are not strongly involved" (1905: 220).

As a consequence of the above characteristics of humor, we can consider its non-engagement in action. As Morreall (1989) argued, human beings, unlike animals — where incongruity provoked by negative emotions and puzzlement implies motivation for change in order to survive —, are capable of *enjoying* incongruity, an enjoyment which is defined by a lack of motivation for change.

Similarly, one may consider that the specific relationship humor holds with truth is also colored by the lack of any engagement. Raskin has recently argued that “truthfulness — a commitment to the literal truth of what is said under any circumstances and in any mode of communication — should be seen as counterindicative of the sense of humor” (1998: 108). In addition, the “indiscriminate rejection of lying — viewing lying as saying something which is not true to fact rather than saying the opposite of what one believes to be true, and rejecting this misdefined lying under any circumstances — is a strong counterindication to humor” (1998: 108).

Religion

All of the above realities implied by playfulness seem to be counter-indicative to religion and religiousness. Such a conclusion can be based on the psychological understanding of the religious personality as well as the psychological anthropology of early Christianity and its suspicion of laughter.

Le Goff (1990) cited a monastic rule (extracted from the *Regle Orientale*) where a link between laughter and play is perceptible: “If a brother willingly *laughs and plays* with children, ... he will be warned three times; if he does not stop, he will be corrected with the most severe punishment” (our trans. and italics, 97).

The lack of finality and usefulness inherent to humor seems incompatible with the religious faith. Religiousness is structured by a need for integration with, and subordination of everything to, the faith: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10: 31). The quest for meaning is applied to all aspects of life, which has to bow to religious purpose.⁴ It is not surprising that Gregory of Nyssa (4th century) considers laughter as an enemy of man, because laughter is neither a word nor action ordered towards any possible goal (*Patrologia Graeca* 44: 645c / Gregorii Nyssani 1962: 310). Interestingly, even Thomas Aquinas, probably the only Christian Father of the Church

who legitimated the virtue of “eutrapelia” (a kind of equilibrium between seriousness and the ludic), needs to justify this “tolerance” as openness to a reality (ludic) which is necessary for the relaxation of the body, the later being necessary for the spiritual life (see Rahner 1961).

More generally, religiousness is negatively correlated with impulsivity (especially when researchers use the more recent construct of Eysenck’s Psychoticism, where impulsivity is included; Francis 1992). The religious personality also seems to be associated with Conscientiousness (Saroglou 2002; Saroglou and Jaspard 2000, for review). Interestingly, the article “Humor” in the contemporary *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, an article valorizing humor in spirituality, specifies that “humor in the spiritual life should not be spontaneous, especially in the beginning; it needs a certain experience” (our trans., Derville 1969: 1191).

In addition, one can hypothesize that religion would be unlikely to encourage an arrest of either moral or affective judgment. For example, if we refer to the early Christian literature, we observe that religious instructions concerning moral self-evaluation seem to cover everything in psychic life, including domains such as dreams, which are beyond will and control. In this literature, the monk as well as the believer was called upon to inspect the content of his dreams and make a spiritual judgment based on either the effects the dream provoked or behavior the day prior to the dream (Saroglou 1992). Regarding affective indifference, we have to remember that religious people systematically report high altruism and Agreeableness (Saroglou 2002, for review), and are systematically low in Eysenck’s Psychoticism (Saroglou and Jaspard 2000, for review). This explains why John Chrysostom (5th century) condemns laughter as a moment of indifference (see Hausherr 1944), and why John Climacus (7th century) qualifies insensibility as the “mother of laughter” (trans. 1982: 192).

Consequently, the importance of being engaged, and of acting on that engagement, is particularly present in a religious context. Studies in many European countries have demonstrated that young people with a strong religious identity, be it Catholic or Protestant, are less convinced than their non-religious peers that the point of life is to “obtain the best possible deal for themselves” (Campiche 1997).

Finally, religion is particularly sensitive to engagement with truth, and moreover, literal truth. Christ’s command “let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil” (Mt 5: 37) seems to hold true: in self-report measures, in any case, religiosity and religious

orthodoxy are associated with honesty and unwillingness to cheat on his own taxes (Hood et al. 1996, for review).

Novelty, sensation seeking and risk

Humor

In as far as incongruity and surprise are essential to humor, one might also suppose that a sense of humor implies an openness to novelty. In fact, conservatism, defined as the generalized fear of uncertainty and avoidance of new, complex, incongruent and ambiguous stimuli (Wilson 1973), seems negatively associated with humor appreciation (Thomas et al. 1971; Wilson and Patterson 1969). Work by Ruch (1992) demonstrated that conservative people appreciate incongruity-resolution humor over non-sense humor. In addition, sensation seeking — a trait reflecting a need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences (Zuckerman 1979) — has been found to predict high reported sense of humor (Deckers and Ruch 1992), as well as high appreciation of nonsense humor and low appreciation of incongruity-resolution humor (Ruch 1992). Finally, if risk is inherent to play (Duflo 1997), one can assume that humor — in sharing many affinities with play — will also be linked to a preference for risk.

Religion

Not unexpectedly, religious people tend to be conservative. This conservatism covers not only sexuality (abortion, divorce, pornography, contraception, feminism, nudity in advertising) but also issues such as political orientation, traditional gender roles and capital punishment (see Hood et al. 1996, for review). Religious people also tend to attach great importance, as mentioned earlier, to the values of Tradition, Security, and Conformity, and low importance to the value of Stimulation (excitement, novelty and challenge) (Burris and Tarpley 1998; Schwartz and Huismans 1995). Finally, Miller and Hoffmann (1995) found that religiosity predisposes people to avoid risk and danger.

Emotional aspects and self-control

Humor

Leventhal and Safer (1977) pled for a greater integration of emotional aspects in humor theories, and tended to associate humor with a specific affect. Ruch (1993) proposed the association of humor with a specific emotion, exhilaration, defined by specific emotional experiences and physiological reactions. Recently, Deckers (1998) has argued that mood, characterized as low-intensity emotion, influences humor, a review of contemporary research leading him to conclude that there is some evidence in this direction.

Morreall's (1987) theoretical position, however, is that humor and amusement do not constitute emotion, because amusement doesn't have a practical orientation and is not followed by action, which, according to him, is typical of emotions. Morreall's argument is based on the conception of emotion as a way of dealing with practical situations and aiding survival, most clearly in animals, but also in humans. In humans, one has to consider cultural emotions as an evolution of animal ones, even if the practical dimension of these may be harder to discern.

Nevertheless, insistence on the motivation to action and change as a criterion in defining emotion, thereby denying the emotive character of humor, is problematic. Firstly, pretending that emotional experience but not amusement "stimulates us to do something other than have that experience" (Morreall 1987: 221) is problematic in terms of contemporary thinking on the psychology of emotions. For example, emotions also seem to be characterized by a need for mental rumination (Rimé et al. 1992), which can be seen as contrary to action, as it is defined by Moreall as "doing something other".

In addition to mental rumination, recent work on the psychology of emotions has shown that emotions, both positive and negative, are characterized by a need to be shared socially (Rimé et al. 1992, 1997): people need to relive emotional experiences through the "repetition" of sharing them socially. We may observe that humor and laughter resemble emotions in this aspect: people are prompt to report to their friends humorous and amusing things that have happened to them, and jokes and witticisms they have either recounted or heard.

Finally, humor is also linked to emotion by the element of surprise. In the case of humor, the incongruity of the stimulus provokes a surprise

which demands a resolution (Suls 1972). According to Bariaud (1983), the element of surprise constitutes a condition for the humorous perception of incongruity (see also the definition of laughter by Kant). Similarly, surprise is also a typical element of emotion in general: subjects perceive a discrepancy between expectations and events-stimuli, and afterwards evaluate whether the stimulation is agreeable or not (Scherer 1989). Even joy may be considered as a surprise, in the sense either that expectations are surpassed, or that unexpected stimuli turned out to be conform to goals (Scherer 1989).

This emotional aspect of surprise, characteristic of both humor and emotion in general, implies a momentary loss of control. The entire philosophical tradition considers emotion as the experience of losing self-control. In contemporary psychology of emotions, even where emotions are conceptualized as adaptive responses with organized and organizing structures (Frijda 1989), they remain adaptive responses to a break — something happening beyond our control. The disruption this causes may explain our social need to share emotions (Rimé et al. 1992, 1997).

Laughter certainly, but humor also may be considered as an involuntary reaction. Berger observes that the comic, although it can be deliberately constructed, “very often simply happens or befalls the individual” (1997: 14). Freud had already underlined that wit escapes from the deliberate act: “We speak, it is true, of ‘making’ a joke; but we are aware that when we do so our behaviour is different from what it is when we make a judgment or make an objection. A joke has quite outstandingly the characteristic of being a notion that occurred to us ‘involuntarily’” (1905: 167). One can understand this relationship between humor and loss of control when one considers that alcohol, as Ziv (1984) reminds us, diminishes vigilance and weakens the rational thought, a state particularly favorable to the irrational thought of humor.

Religion

From both an empirical and theoretical perspective, religion is associated with a need for control. Theoretically, it has been argued that religion is animated by this need for control: faith implies a need for control of events and self, and the need for meaning may be understood as part of this need for control (Hood et al. 1996). It is worth reporting that in early Christian ascetic literature and, more generally, in the entire patristic

thought of early Christianity, the ideals of self-mastery and vigilance are extremely important. For example, suspicion of dreams is explained by the fact that dreaming was considered an experience beyond the control of the dreamer because, according to this literature, the intellect was not awake and consequently not capable of controlling the soul's wanderings (Saroglou 1992). This need for self mastery is so important that moral examination is demanded even in the case of "nocturnal pollutions" for which the will normally should not be considered as responsible (Saroglou 1992).

Empirically, religiousness is associated with orderliness (Lewis 1998, for review), Conscientiousness (Saroglou 2002, for review), and low impulsivity (Francis 1992). Consequently, one may hypothesize that such an experience where laughter erupts, almost without "premeditation", may appear suspect to religion. We may also consider that previously mentioned characteristics of the religious personality, such as intolerance of ambiguity, discomfort with novelty and uncertainty, conservatism, and risk avoidance are all components of a more general trait: the need for self-mastery.

Not surprisingly, the mistrust towards the comic in early Christianity seems to be based on this need for control. Firstly, not only negative (fear, sadness, and anger) but also positive (joy) emotions are viewed with suspicion because of their unpredictable character. Secondly, laughter and humor are also seen as a failure of self mastery. For example, according to Basil the Great (4th century), "raucous laughter and uncontrollable shaking of the body are not indicative of a well-regulated soul, or of personal dignity, or self-mastery" (trans. 1950: 271). Christianity followed antiquity in this point: immoderate laughter is a sign of slackening (Guillaumont 1996). This may explain why John Climacus (7th century) advises his disciples in the following terms: "In your heart be like an emperor ... commanding laughter: 'Go', and it goes; and sweet weeping: 'Come', and it comes" (trans. 1982: 140).

Tendentious aspects

Humor

Aggression/Dominance. Freud (1905) distinguished between innocent and tendentious humor, the later being essentially hostile and/or sexual.

Aggression is particularly involved in humor. For example, humor seems to have a disinhibiting effect on aggression (Nevo and Nevo 1983; Ziv and Gadish 1990). (It is another question, in our opinion, whether the expression of humor might reduce an aggressive mood; Dworkin and Effan 1967; Ziv 1987.)

There is no doubt that aggressive humor is very common. The question that remains is whether the dimension of aggression or at least dominance (see Gruner 1978) is typical to some or all types of humor. Some theoretical and empirical evidence suggests the later.

First, according to Wyer and Collins (1992), the diminishment of the stimulus is an important condition in eliciting humor: "Humor is elicited only if the inferred features of one or more referents of a reinterpreted stimulus event are diminished in value or importance relative to the features that were inferred on the basis of an alternative interpretation of the event" (673).

Second, Freud, although he introduced the distinction between innocent and tendentious humor, wondered whether every joke wasn't tendentious (1905: 131–133). Similarly, Christie (1994) argues that both humor and irony include an aggressive or rebel element (see also Defays 1996). We may also wonder whether even what is usually called "philosophical irony" does not constitute a kind of ritualized, sublimate expression of aggression or rebellion towards the incongruity of the world and human existence.

Third, from a systemic perspective, humor may be considered as a way to get out of a closed and structured system. We argue that this "exit" is a demonstration if not of aggression, at least of power and dominance, and that it certainly establishes an asymmetrical relationship. The person who introduces humor in an interpersonal context, demonstrates 1) that he knows the exit from the defined framework is possible, 2) that he is able and even that he is — at that moment — the only/first person able to exit, 3) and that he decides at what moment and by transgressing which "norms" to do it.⁵

Consequently, it is not surprising that the personality trait of dominance is associated with sense of humor (Thorson and Powell 1993), humor creation (Ehrenberg 1995) and cheerfulness (Ruch and Köhler 1998).

Sexuality. Along with the dimension of aggression/dominance, sexuality is also a prominent component of humor. When factor analyses of humor materials are conducted, sexual humor turns out to constitute a specific

type. In addition, it is possible that sexuality or pleasure with a sexual connotation constitutes something more than one type of humor in the humor process. For example, Freud (1905) analyzed the connotation of fore-pleasure that characterizes humor, a characteristic which could explain the role of humor in seduction. Furthermore, in the Nevo and Nevo's (1983) experiment, people who had been asked to answer Rosenzweig's Frustration Test humorously introduced more sexual themes than people who answered the test without specific instruction. Finally, Ruch and Hehl (1988) found that people high in sexual satisfaction and permissiveness were also high in humor appreciation.

In conclusion, aggression/dominance and sexuality constitute specific and important humor types, but also seem to constitute an important element of humor in general. Given this, and that sexuality and aggression are usually considered as the two universal themes of social prohibition, one has to seriously consider that the enjoyment of humor may essentially be an enjoyment of the transgression of moral rules. (Transgression of the subjective moral order becomes an important condition in recent humor theory put forward by Veatch [1998].)

Religion

Aggression/Dominance. Although the relationship between religion and violence may be complex, no doubt exists that, in its explicit discourse, religion prohibits aggression. Religious ideals of tolerance, forgiveness and universal charity may be supposed to have a prohibiting effect on aggression and eventually on dominance, as well as a promoting effect on altruism⁶.

Regarding aggression, to our knowledge, no empirical evidence exists with regards to religious personality. Nevertheless, strong empirical evidence exists concerning altruism: religiosity is systematically associated with low Psychoticism (in Eysenck's taxonomy of personality factors, Psychoticism is the trait of cold, hostile, lacking sympathy, unfriendly people) (Francis 1992; Saroglou and Jaspard 2000, for reviews), high Agreeableness (in terms of the Five Factor Model; Saroglou 2002, for review), and high reported altruism and prosocial behavior (Batson et al. 1993, for review). Regarding social dominance (a recent construct defined by Pratto et al. 1994), in the studies undertaken until now, religious measures seem to be negatively (although weakly) related to this construct

(Altemeyer 1998; Heaven and Connors 2001). Furthermore, using a similar construct to dominance, i.e. value of power, Burriss and Tarpley (1998) found that both questing and intrinsically religious people tend to attribute low importance to this value (for similar but not significant results, see Schwartz and Huismans 1995).

This tendency of the religious personality to high altruism and low interest in dominance and power may help explain why early Christianity condemns ironic and hostile laughter. It is important to note that the biblical distinction between permitted laughter, reflecting joy and well-being, and laughter which is hostile and denigrating, and therefore prohibited, gave way to a generalized suspicion towards laughter in the first medieval period (Le Goff 1990). However, this is not only the case in ancient Christianity; when we look at contemporary works of Christian spirituality, the distinction between good, morally appreciated humor, and bad, hostile humor, disrespectful to other people, is made very clear. For example, in an essay on St. Bernard's humor, Leclercq (1959) takes care to specify that the humor of this saint was "always moralizing". The article "Humor" in the above mentioned *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* underlines that "humor is more thoughtful, more serene and sympathetic", while irony is "malicious, destructive and denigrating to the other person" (Derville 1969: 1188–1189, our trans.).

Sexuality. Developing the argument that religion is suspicious towards sexuality may seem superfluous. For those in doubt, it is interesting to notice that, while the contemporary discourse of various religious denominations tends to valorize the body and its sexuality, empirical research indicates that religiousness still affects and prohibits in some extent sexuality, even among young people. For example, religiousness predicts low permissiveness of premarital sex (Haerich 1992), a preference for nonrevealing clothing (Edmonds and Cahoon 1993), low attraction to absolute sexual freedom (in young people of many European countries, Campiche 1997), low importance attached to the value of Hedonism among populations of different religions in both Europe and the USA (Burriss and Tarpley 1998; Schwartz and Huismans 1995), and low sexual attraction towards clients reported by psychotherapists (Case et al. 1997).

Again, patristic literature seems aware of the relationship between sexuality and the comic. John Climacus clearly links laughter and voluptuous pleasure (trans. 1982: 138). In the Apophthegms of the Desert Fathers, impurity is "touching the body, laughing and talking without

restraint” (our trans., *Les Sentences des Pères du Désert*: 142); and elsewhere, it is mentioned that “having a shameless gaze and laughing immoderately” is typical of people without temperance (*Syncletica* 2; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: 893). This may explain why the monk Jorge, the famous enemy of laughter in *The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1983), describes laughter as “diurnal pollution” (474).

In conclusion, if humor may be considered as a transgression of rules and especially of the two universal “taboos” concerning sexuality and aggression, religion on the contrary is supposed to express these prohibitions and both theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that it succeeds in doing so.

Conclusion

It appears that, 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, lack of truthfulness and finality, affective and moral disengagement, loss of control and order as implied by emotionality, and finally transgression, especially transgression of prohibitions related to aggression/dominance and sexuality.

One may object that there might be other traits associated with humor, which may have positive affinities with religiousness. Although this was not the purpose of this article, the one personality trait we are able to present here that may be common to both is optimism-positivity. Religious people, including fundamentalists, are known to report high optimism and positivity in subjective well-being (Diener et al. 1999; Sethi and Seligman 1993), characteristics also strongly associated with sense of humor (Kuiper and Martin 1998). Nevertheless, up until now, the later has mainly been established with reported sense of humor.

This apart, the considerable evidence presented in the present paper suggests that, overall, religiousness may be negatively associated with sense of humor. Empirical research is needed in order to investigate this and other more subtle hypotheses, such as whether type of religiosity (open vs. close-minded), altruism and ethical preoccupations invoked by specific situations, may influence or explain this possible negative relation

between religion and humor. Some initial empirical studies (Saroglou in press-b, in press-c; Saroglou and Jaspard 2001) suggest that the general conclusion in this paper is not far from reality.

One might object that most of the arguments presented in this article are based on empirical research and examination of religious ideas mainly in Christianity. It is not to be excluded then that, in other religions, conception and value of humor differ from these in Christian religion. However, beyond possible *between*-religion differences, the hypothesis of a somehow negative association between religiousness and sense of humor may hold true *within* many religions: for instance, most if not all of the personality correlates of religiousness presented in this article (constructs typical of close-mindedness, conservatism, need for control and order, prohibition of aggression and sexuality) are also present in religions other than Christianity.

Finally, we ask people who will react to this article by insisting they know religious people with a good sense of humor, to think twice: it is possible that religious people may have a good sense of humor *despite* their religiosity; and not necessarily *because* of it.

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Notes

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1. By “religiousness” we mean the general, personal, pro-religious attitude mainly reflected in the concept of “intrinsic” religion.
2. The above mentioned studies describe *religiosity per se*. Of course, it is another question whether *open-mature religiosity* follows the same pattern regarding these cognitive constructs. In fact, open-mature religion and spirituality are positively related to Openness to Experience (Saroglou 2002).
3. Berger (1997) argued recently that laughter shares with religion a redeeming quality: both transcend the reality of ordinary life, both posit a different reality in which ordinary assumptions and rules are suspended. The laughter may be even an act of faith, a faith equivalent to the intuition that the promise of redemption made by laughter will be kept. We criticized elsewhere (Saroglou 1998) this argument. First, it constitutes a theological assumption rather than an hypothesis based on empirical research reflecting common religious personality. Second, in our opinion, laughter may question or unmask the limits of the paramount reality, but it does not posit, as Berger argues, “something objectively out there in the world”. That is what religion does.
4. One may object that secularization has challenged such an integrative approach in the religious life. However, it remains that the religious ideal, as expressed by institutional religions or new religious movements, favors the integrative model of life, a life

subordinated to religion, rather than the complete autonomization of the religious life with regard to other domains of life.

5. In fact, the other person is put in a situation of a “double-bind”: if he protests, he is considered negatively as not capable of humor; if he does not react, he is obviously diminished. A possible way to reestablish a symmetric relationship is to answer again with humor.
6. We are of course aware of the possibility that religion, directly or indirectly, also encourages aggression (especially out-group aggression). However, as Batson (1983) observes, from a socio-biological perspective, religion is considered as a social mechanism promoting universal brotherhood and fraternity, and, in such a way, it widens the limits of natural kinship.

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