



Pål Ketil Botvar, Ann Kristin Gresaker, and Olav Hovdelien (eds): *Ingen Spøk – en studie av religion og humour*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk, Nordic Open Access Scholarly Publishing 2019, 297 pp.

The anthology *Ingen Spøk – en studie av religion og humour* (*No Joke: A Study of Religion and Humour*) offers a fresh perspective on the role religion plays in society and culture today. The book is edited by Pål Ketil Botvar, Ann Kristin Gresaker, and Olav Hovdelien. It focuses primarily on the Scandinavian context. The background is a joint project ‘Humour and religion – conflict, dialogue and change’ between KIFO, OsloMet, and the University of Agder. The anthology takes as its departure the sociology of religion, media studies, and theories of humour. It is structured through two themes: ‘Religion in humour’ and ‘Humour in religion’. Prior to these sections two chapters establish the publication’s framework.

In the first chapter the sensitive context for the theme is made clear – making fun of religion is connected with terrorist attacks and cartoonists living under police protection. This has placed the question of humour at the centre of the debate about religion in the public sphere. This anthology addresses the question through cases that point to the complexity of religion and humour in our contemporary context. The first chapter also establishes the anthology’s theoretical themes concern-

ing religion, media, and humour. The second introductory chapter presents an analysis of material from a Norwegian national survey of attitudes to humour and religion among the public. The analysis provides an insight into the normative framework of humour and religion in Norway. It indicates that at the same time as a majority across the board is open to humour concerning religion, there is a connection where the more religiously active people are, the less accepting they are of such humour. The analysis of this material is a strong point of the anthology, because it provides an insight into the context of most of the cases presented under the two themes.

Under the ‘Religion in humour’ theme four contributions discuss religion as it is portrayed in comedic genres and contexts. Kai Hanno Schwind analyses British and American comedies, which are part of the media consumption of many Scandinavians. Ann Kristin Gresaker examines jokes about religion, gender, and sex in a men’s magazine, showing how they strengthen stereotypical images of gender and religion. Sofia Sjö discusses the representation of Islam in two Norwegian comedies. She presents the categories of migrant cinema or diaspora cinema as part of a societal reflection on ethnicity, arguing that these movies have a potential to challenge stereotypes. In Pål Repstad’s chapter on representations of pastors of the Norwegian Church, a historical perspective is

presented, linking the development to a general diminishment of authority and a shift to a softer Christianity. Gresaker's and Hovdeliens' contribution analyses the viewpoints of stand-up comedians between the ideals of free speech and the realities of concerns about what to make fun of and whom. These contributions raise an interesting question of when and how religion in humour is a tool for solidifying stereotypes, and when it is a tool for change. As there are no concluding chapters for the sections or the anthology as a whole, these questions are not discussed across the publication.

Under the heading 'Humour in religion' seven contributions discuss humour in specific religious and life view contexts, providing an insight into the norms of humour across majority and minority contexts. The chapter by Bjarte Lee-Helgesen on the use of humour by pastors in the Norwegian Church in relation to death discusses the role of tension relief, and how the humorous portrayal of the deceased by a pastor can create room for a healing laughter. Andreas Häger discusses the difficulty of using humour as a religious organization through an examination of reactions on social media to jokes made by the Swedish church. The use of humour to gain a place in the public discourse is also present in the chapter by Olav Hovdelien in the case of two Catholic religious order brothers. The chapter by Shohaib Sultan on Muslim traditions and contemporary Muslim stand-up comedians provides an

interesting insight into how humour has played a role both in the Western world and Muslim countries, with a focus on popular culture. Gunnar Haaland analyses rules and norms about what to make fun of in the weekly Friday joke in the Oslo Jewish community's newsletter.

In analysing humour in a new age context, Irene Trynes finds a tendency to a more mild and positive humour, and a move away from the more satirical and self-critical segments that were found previously. There is no lack of smiling or laughing people in the images in this context, but it is a happy, mild laughter! A similar dilemma between harsh humour and maintaining a more positive tone is reflected in the chapter by Benjamin Eriksen and Didrik Söderlind on atheist and humanist communities. Whereas there is a tradition of atheists using harsh humour in their criticism of religion, the humanist groups are critical of this from a perspective in which all views of life should be treated respectfully. Across these contributions it is clear that understanding and navigating norms of humour can offer an advantage in both internal and external communication. However, breaking norms provokes strong reactions, and in the modern social media context it is difficult not only for individuals but religious organizations to find the right balance.

The strength of any anthology is that the reader is allowed to move through different cases and contexts following a common theme.

The weakness is that it is difficult to connect the perspectives raised in the various chapters. This anthology provides a good foundation for connecting the material in its first two chapters. Yet there are some questions across the book with which it would have been interesting to reconnect in a closing chapter.

As mentioned, this could have been a discussion of when and why humour becomes a tool for change and at other times seems to lead to a stagnation of stereotypes of religion. Are the differences primarily connected with genre norms or specific religious traditions and their place in society? And what are we seeing across the various contexts concerning religious authority through the lens of humour and religion, both internally and externally? What, for example, is going on with the constant use of Roman Catholic clergy in jokes in a context where there are relatively few Catholics? And what does the stereotype of religious people as lacking in humour tell us about the place of religion in society and culture today?

This all points to a question of norms of humour and religion as part of the Scandinavian context. This is touched on to some degree, but it would have been interesting if there had been a conclusive discussion of the norms of humour in relation to society. An example of such a discussion can be found in a recent Danish publication, *Humoursocialisering* by Lita Lundquist, which explores the national norms of humour and its consequences.

Humour can include or exclude, a well-known fact in the Scandinavian countries too. For example, there is a Danish joke that the shortest book in the world is called 'Norwegian humour'. But as Lundquist concludes in her book, Danes are not as funny as they think they are. And this anthology shows that the Norwegian context has the upper hand when it comes to research into humour and religion. The anthology provides interesting and relevant analyses of cases within a common framework linking theories of humour to theories of contemporary religion. It offers a fresh and interesting perspective on a central aspect of religion today, and I highly recommend it.

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