

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS AND THE CHALLENGE OF COMEDY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: AN ETHICAL APPRAISAL OF THE USE OF RELIGIOUS TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The moral landscape of contemporary Nigeria is complex and multifaceted, with the country's pluralistic society compounding ethical dilemmas across various facets of human endeavour. The emergence of comedy utilizing religious texts in Nigerian society has sparked critical ethical concerns, particularly among Christian religious scholars. This paper conducts an ethical appraisal of the use of religious texts in comedy, examining the moral implications of this trend. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study analyses comic content and its use of religious texts, arguing that justifying comedy for its own sake is insufficient without critically evaluating its contextual use of sacred texts, especially within the Christian circle on social media. The paper contends that a critical analysis of the use of religious texts for content creation by Christian comedians on social media is essential in assessing the ethical implications of comedy in contemporary Nigerian society. Hence, this paper selected a comedy content that used religious texts to evaluate the ethical implications.

KEYWORDS: Comedy, Religion Scholar, ethical appraisal

INTRODUCTION

Christian religious scholars have undertaken the critical examination of various ethical issues depending on contextual peculiarity across global societies. In an attempt to build on existing discourse, this paper is concerned with the subject of comedy within the context of the Christian religion, especially the use of religious texts in creating comic content on media for public consumption in contemporary Nigeria. Stating its universal nature, Alan Partington argued that laughter may be universal, and its forms may be extremely similar across diverse cultures and linguistic groups... (23). As an integral part of our human existence, the study of humour has been undertaken from socio-anthropological, psychological, philosophical, and religious perspectives as noted by Frank Machovec, Critchley Simon, Carbelor Baquero, and Martin A-Rod.

Subsequently, scholars like Prieto Jose et al have observed the obvious integration of humour in religious practice (1). Other scholars like Bernard Schweizer have contrasted the relationship between humour and religion, underpinning both convergent and divergent views. Lina Lierderman also stressed the connection between humour and religion, noting that religion and humour are relational and community-based: a religious idea and a joke can each foster mutual understanding, help build bridges, maintain our connection to others, and increase a sense of community (2). Though the above assumptions acknowledged humour as an integral part of our human existence and the position between humour and religion, this paper is concerned particularly with the phenomenon of using religious text, especially Bible stories and narratives, for content creation, an aspect of humour within the Nigerian context. Meanwhile, it is presumed that the oral tradition within the African traditional context is a major factor in the development of comedy in Nigeria, beginning from the pre-colonial era, as noted by Izuu Nwanko (6). Nwanko also identified specific traditional entertaining practices (Efe, Yan kama/Wawan Sarki, and Njakiri) across the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria that are tantamount to the contemporary practice of stand-up comedy (1-2).

Moreover, though Nwanko has attempted to provide a historical development of comedy in its theatre form through television and professional stand-up comedy, the emergence of the mobile phone and the social network eventually led to the proliferation of other forms of comedies in contemporary Nigeria. Consequently, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, YouTube, etc. have become mediums for downloading and uploading various comic content. It can be presumed that an average Nigerian cannot log in to these social platforms without watching one or two comic reels. The above presumption may be justified by the number of likes and comments under most of these comic videos. Today, the comic forms prevalent within the Nigerian social space include videos on jokes, pranks, stand-up comedy, masque, reels, farce, character mimicking, etc. Some of these comic links includes Mrfunny1_, @sabinus_official, Mr_lyfe comedy, @brainjotter, @sydneyTalker, @markangelcomedy, @mimi.funny, @officialkoloboy1, @sydiwundu, @ayampressureking, @funnybrocomedy, etc. The lists of these comic links are inexhaustible, and each has its peculiar comic content.

As a statement of the problem, while the obvious prevalence of comedy in its various forms characterized the Nigerian social context, little attention has been given to a critical ethical analysis of the use of religious texts in content creation among supposed content creators. Though this attitude is not foreign to the discourse on comedy, the current reality within the Nigerian context calls for a critical ethical examination. The morality of the use of sacred text for comedy, its content, the comedian, and its ethical implications on the Nigerian masses ought to be considered. Using analytic and content analysis, this paper examined related concepts, gave

a historical overview of comedy, explored the Nigerian socio-political context, did an ethical appraisal, and made recommendations.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Like many other concepts, comedy developed alongside different connotations depending on the context it is used. Young, Marx, Nick, and Sienkiewicz affirmed the difficulty in having a unified concept. However, while Foley P. Michel sees comedy as a theatrical performance that delights audiences with its humorous and entertaining narrative, resulting in a happy ending to its plot (4), Destree Pierre captures Aristotle's concept who sees comedy as the representation of men of lesser value, but not in a sense that would imply all defects and whose fault possess something ridiculous (7). John Morrell said that comedy exhibits a non-idealistic, practical mindset towards life's incongruities. Again, from the submission of Jauregui, comedy can be defined as any humorous communication intentionally produced to amuse (49). All the above suppositions highlighted comedy in its literary and practical form as applicable to everyday life. The concept of the scholar of religion within this paper embraces the specialty of an intellectual individual who has an appreciable knowledge of religion, particularly the Christian religion, and undertakes intelligible discourse on religious phenomena and other issues affecting the practice of religion.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF COMEDY

Like any other human phenomenon, comedy has its historical antecedents from the ancient period to the contemporary. Hoy Cyrus Henry observed that the classic conception of comedy, which began with Aristotle in ancient Greece in the 4th century BCE and persists through the present, holds that it is primarily concerned with people in their social context, rather than as private persons, and that its function is openly corrective (1). Hoy further notes that the word "comedy" is etymologically connected to the Greek verb signifying "to revel." It emerged from the celebrations tied to the privileges of Dionysus, the god of vegetation. Vegetation rituals played a significant role in the historical inception of comedy. These rituals celebrated life, fertility, and the cyclical nature of existence. In addition to its historical originality, Rozik Eli posited two perspectives, historical evidence and ritual theory, in the consolidation of the suppositions of Macdonald Conford, who deduced the ceremonial or ritual source of Greek comedy (20).

Historically, as established by existing scholarship, comedy is originally traced to ancient Greece, followed by the Roman dramatists, through the medieval period down to the contemporary. Providing a historical evolution of comedy, Applause Nicolino deduced that,

From Greek comedy to Roman satire, forms of entertainment evolved during the medieval times to mystery plays and sermons, popularly performed in churches and public squares. In the early Middle Ages (around the fifth to tenth centuries), comedy was frequently associated with theatrical recitals characterized by cheery plots about the lives of common people and is said to have emerged from the rural space during festivities (12-13).

Konstantakos M. Ioannis, in summarizing its progressive modification to the contemporary forms, posits that,

Apart from words, there are also concepts, notions, and genres. The genre of comedy, comic drama, the fictional or representative work which humorously pictures the world and aims at raising laughter or at creating a ludicrous effect — the genre that survives today under the title comedy, in theatre, in prose fiction, in cinema and TV, this genre has its origins in ancient Greece, twenty-five centuries and more before our age (1).

The obvious historical antecedent of comedy authenticates its gradual evolution from its earliest form within the ancient Greek period to its multifaceted forms in contemporary society. Today, comedy has not only become a professional career but a daily source of livelihood, especially for contemporary Nigerian youths through skit making. There are numerous existing comedy videos on social media platforms, with many that use religious texts for their content.

TRAGIC REALITIES AS CAUSAL FACTORS FOR PROMOTING COMEDY

A vivid understanding of the Nigerian socio-political context is critical in analysing existential phenomena of comedy and the use of religious texts for content creation. Chinwuba Gregory Emeka, observing Patterson, rightly opines that Human socio-political thoughts, behaviours, practices, and ethnic consciousness are shaped by cultural orientations, and cosmic realities are viewed and interpreted from cultural windows. As an indispensable fulcrum of existence, culture forms the interiority of the being of a people and subsequently shapes their existence (2). Today, the Nigerian socio-political context is characterized by skyrocketing tragic realities. To argue this supposition beyond mere speculation, Tunde Adebisi et al have also observed that tragedies in Nigeria can be exemplified by the various social problems that cause both emotional and material distress in the country (3). Affirming the various social problems in Nigeria, concerned scholars like Shuabu Monday Ufedo, Ikechukwu Ozoigho Okorie Kalu et al have referred to insecurity challenges, ethnic and religious pluralism and intolerance, fatal ideologies and extremism, and unemployment worsened by exponential corruption by the ruling class, and a somewhat shaky democratic rule as tragic realities that justify the use of comedy (2). The socio-political context of Nigerian

society is more complex due to its pluralistic and multiethnic nature and remains a causal factor in conflicts and other social ills.

Consequently, the synopsis of the above assertions in comparison to the current realities indicates a continuous deterioration of Nigeria's social and political well-being. The socio-political happenings over the years since independence have been characterized by tragic realities. These tragic realities have become problems of research among concerned scholars across different disciplines. Surprisingly and ironically, the socio-political tragic realities have become a causal factor and viable tool for promoting comedy and the use of religious texts across various social media platforms. Paradoxically, the Nigerian comic atmosphere emerged and developed from the oven of tragic realities. Nigerians, unlike most global societies, have developed resilience in coping with tragic realities by using the same to make comic content. The Nigerian's ability to turn tragic realities into comic content appeals to the relief theory that presupposes laughter in relieving emotional distress and the incongruity theory that violates our mental reasoning pattern. Amidst the difficulties, Nigerians seem to have found consolation in humour, using comedy as a coping mechanism to alleviate stress and highlight the absurdities in their daily lives, even adopting the use of religious texts for content creation.

ETHICAL APPRAISAL OF COMEDY

The absence of a unified position among Christian religious scholars on the use of comedy, its justification of the use of religious texts, and the lack of regulating policies on the use of comedy within the Nigerian context calls for ethical evaluation. While the general ethical theories and principles can be used in appraising the use of comedy, the Christian ethicist gives more preference to Christian ethical principles in evaluating comedy. Lovin W Robin observed two perspectives for ethical discourse, philosophical and theological, and posits that the philosophical perspective deals with human reason as the primary source for deriving Christian ethics, whereas the theological perspective asserts that divine revelation, as contained in Scripture, is the ultimate source of Christian ethics (26). Though the two perspectives will be utilized in appraising comedy, preference will be given to the Christian perspective.

Subsequently, Heimbach R Daniel, Verhey Allen, Wells Samuel et al, Boyd A Craig, and Thorsen Don, and Kunhiyop Waje Samuel have pinpointed the centrality of Christian ethics and its peculiar nature from secular ethics. Both scholars have identified the centrality of Christ, the Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and Christian tradition as foundations for Christian ethics. Consequently, the universal ethical theories of utilitarianism, consequentialism, and virtue ethics will be applied in the analysis of comedy, with much emphasis placed on Christian ethical principles.

General Analysis

Though this analysis will provide a general ethical evaluation of comedy as a phenomenon in Nigeria, particular reference is given to specific comic video content randomly selected on YouTube for in-depth examination. Taking the functions and purpose of comedy as the first point of analysis, McGowan observes that most of the time, comedy enables us to enjoy without calling our mode of enjoyment into question (56). He also noted that the revelatory power of comedy can have a transformative effect on the subject who laughs. Laughing can provide more insight than any amount of self-reflection if the comedy is the kind that enables subjects to grasp the structure of their enjoyment. Machovec further explores the impact of comedy on human health, referring to the research conducted by William Fry at Stanford Medical School. The use of humour in psychotherapy and challenging racism and sexism have all been noted by Machovec and McGowan. It has also been observed that humour can enhance learning, communication, and relationships, making it a valuable asset in various settings (341-342).

Contextually, whereas the above functions may generally apply to various contexts, the current reality of the Nigerian context seems to affirm comedy as a financial source of income, especially among professional comedians and skit makers. This is evident in the exorbitant charges from professional comedians and the income accrued through likes and comments on comic skits. Ndifon Ogar Victor et al also advanced and argued the significance of comedy in promoting societal values using Mark Angel Comedy as a case study.

However, in a critical ethical evaluation of comedy both in its professional state and general practice within social media, whereas the stated functions may remain valid and applicable to humour in general, the ethical vacuum in its examination remains a glaring concern. The first general analysis is on the premise that comedy by nature does not warrant critical ethical thinking apart from its eliciting laughter. McGowan and other scholars have argued that the above assertion is a causal factor in why philosophers have not undertaken comedy as a serious academic endeavour. Though the above functions may be related to the utility theory in its tendency to provide excitement for the greatest number (within a comic setting), the consequentialist and virtue ethical dimensions are void. This paper argues that justifying comedy for comedy's sake is not sufficient without critically analysing the comic acts, contents, and the morality of the comedian. These neglected areas of the comic are necessary for ethical evaluation. Citing an example of the moral nature of some comedians, Nwanko observed that people like Baba Sala and Hubert Ogunde, especially, had polygamous marriages because they took almost all female members of their travelling troupes as wives (10). With the validation of this assertion, it is worth noting that while the comic

scene provides us with the opportunity to evaluate the comic act and content, the moral life of the comedian also requires behind-the-scenes examination.

Content Analysis

Considering the proliferation of comedy as emphasized, this paper randomly selected a Mark Angel comedy video and subjected it to ethical evaluation. This appraisal focuses on the comic actions and their ethical implication in the light of ethical theories and Christian ethical principles. Apart from the content, the paper also analysed comments and likes attached to the selected video and its ethical justification. From the comedy links mentioned earlier, Mark Angel's comedy was randomly selected for ethical evaluation. The skit selected is a video on *The Passion of Christ* (Episode 360) on YouTube, April 15th, 2022, supposed to be shot on Good Friday. In the general analysis of the skit, it has a total of 39k likes and 1,617,614 views. The script of the comedy consists of Mark Angel, who acted as the director, with Emmanuella as the production manager and the EP (Executive Producer). Others in the scene include Denilson, who acted the Jesus character alongside the soldiers, the crowd (men and women as the majority), and the character playing Simon of Cyrene.

The whole scene was characterized by a comic undertone, demonstrating the prevalence of incongruities, excess, and lack in both major characters compared with the biblical narrative of the passion of Christ. First, the Jesus Character could not bear the pains of the torture and shouted *Aye mi temi bami* in Yoruba and *chimo* in Igbo, incongruent with the biblical narrative. These incongruities were further demonstrated in the Jesus character, who could not bear the flogging and shouted Jesus Christ of Nazareth, a statement that violates the expectations of the director and audience. Other incongruities, lack, and excess that further climax the play include the attempt of the crowd to stone Jesus, an opposite scriptural scene that demonstrates a lack of understanding of the difference between Jesus' experience on the cross and Stephen's.

Three other major scenes that exaggerated the storyline in contradiction to the biblical account are how Jesus (Denilson) rejected the artificial hair used on his head to give him the semblance of the Character in the *Passion of Christ* movie because of excessive odour. He also rejected the help of the character playing the role of Simon because of the odour under his armpit when he attempted to lift him. Lastly, the spit by one of the women and the use of the handkerchief by another woman to wipe Jesus' face on his way to Calvary, as scripted, were all exaggerated by Jesus' exclamation of excessive odour, lamenting that the said individuals have not brushed their mouths.

Summarily, the comedy content was characterized by incongruities, excesses, and lacks as demonstrated by the major characters to provoke laughter. All efforts to reach Calvary proved abortive because of incongruent interruptions from characters. Having underscored the content therein, it is imperative to provide an ethical evaluation. While the general comic nature of the selected video may align with the utilitarian theory by

its ability to provoke laughter among the greatest number and meet certain functions of comedy, as evident in the comment section, the application of moral reasoning remains imperative.

First, it is important to note and address the nature of some Nigerian comedy in using selected Bible narratives to create comic content, like the video randomly selected. If the Bible is a sacred text, to what extent should its content be used in creating comedy for public consumption? Comparatively, the Christian religion scholar is compelled to ask whether there are religions that downplay their sacred texts in making comic content like Christianity. Does the comedy produced from biblical narratives address the fallen human condition and their need for a saviour? Significantly, this paper argues that since *The Passion of Christ* climaxes the redemptive work of God, like any other portion of Scripture, it is logically inappropriate to use such a scene only for comic purposes. The Christian reflection of *The Passion of Christ* calls for a sober reflection on the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made for the salvation of mankind, instead of using it just to provoke laughter.

Secondly, the goal of every action in Christian moral reasoning is to glorify God (1Corinthians 10:31). With this in mind, one wonders whether the passion of Christ's comedy as depicted glorifies God apart from provoking laughter. Since the comedy concluded with no invitation to accept Christ, it contradicts the essence of the sufferings of Christ for the salvation of mankind and, by implication, demeans the scriptural narrative of the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. From a consequentialist argument, it seems the result of the comedy is to provoke laughter and make viewers feel good. A general evaluation of the comments indicates that the majority have not aligned the comedy with the true essence of Christ's passion. Most comments concentrated on the comic features and the reunion between Mark Angel and Denilson, who seemed to have had a prior misunderstanding.

Finally, taking the passion of Christ's narrative and its biblical essence in contrast to the comedy, it becomes more difficult to understand the moral and spiritual lessons therein. Since comedy is a trending phenomenon in contemporary Nigeria, we argue that the continuous consumption of comedy without moral analysis of its contents and the comedians themselves has ethical ramifications for the general public. The scholar of religion is, therefore, challenged by the obvious reality to scholarly engage the discourse on comedy and provide guidelines for its use and consumption. It is also presumed that comedy's entertaining nature tends to prevent people from critical thinking in facing life's realities, which also calls for scholarly engagement.

CONCLUSION

As humour continues to remain an integral part of humanity, the need to provide a proper perspective for its use is an obligatory responsibility among scholars of religion.

Although existing scholarship on comedy is appreciated, religious scholars are challenged by the prevalence and trending nature of comedy, the use of religious texts in producing comic content, and the infiltration of comedy into the religious setting in contemporary Nigeria, to dig beyond the surface and provide ethical guidelines on its use, especially within the Christian community. Given the daily upload of comedy videos for public consumption without any regulating policy, the scholar of religion is tasked with the responsibility of employing ethical reasoning in providing better ways of utilizing humour across all areas of endeavour. Using general and content analysis, this paper challenges the use of sacred texts in creating comic content and identifies the moral vacuum in the practice of comedy in Nigeria.

We recommend continuous effort in exploring the study of humour within the African and Nigerian context to address peculiar issues relating to the use of comedy. Acknowledging the availability of substantive sources on humour and comedy from a Western perspective, we further recommend scholarship that will contribute an African perspective that will enrich the use of comedy within the African context. Interested scholars can delve into the various approaches in the study of humour as it relates to different areas of discipline.

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