

Conflicts Based on Humor and Religion

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Abstract—This article is devoted to the topic of humor and religion collision, which becomes trending. Increasingly, jokes, memes, caricatures are in the center of religious scandals, criminal cases and even terrorist acts. The history of relationships between laughter and religion is full of contradictions and raises many questions. For a long time, people underestimated the positive qualities of laughter and phenomena associated with it. They considered laughter, associated with sin and vice, only from the standpoint of critical, moralizing tone — in no small part thanks to the medieval theology. However, starting around the end of the 19th century, there is a gradual change in the attitude of society towards the phenomena of laughter and humor. This trend affects all spheres of social and cultural life, including partly theology. However, the traditional religious worldview is still characterized by a significant degree of distrust towards laughter, fun, play, and humor. The presence of a hidden confrontation, between the religious attitude to these phenomena and the general trend of their positive reassessment — can add additional tension in situations of offensive humor or humiliation by humor. Conflicts, which are based on dissatisfaction with specific examples of humor, on the one hand, are no different from conflicts occurring based on works of art for example. On the other hand, humor can provoke the inclusion of additional risks for one of the parties to the conflict — primarily reputational ones.

Keywords—*humor; sense of humor; religion; religiosity; theology of laughter; insult of believers' religious feelings; reputational risk*

I. INTRODUCTION

In modern society, at least Western, one can distinguish two opposite trends. The first of these is related to strengthening the position of humor in society. The second is connected with the growth in the number of conflicts based on the collision of humor with an insult to the feelings of various social groups, primarily religious ones. Increasingly, jokes, memes and humorous behavior are causing intense irritation of religious groups of citizens, leading to criminal cases, international scandals and even terrorist attacks.

Strengthening censorship and, as a result, self-censorship in relation to insulting believers' religious feelings in many countries of the world, including Russia, sometimes becomes absurd. The deployment of globalization processes naturally leads to the consolidation and toughening of religious and humorous conflicts. The brightest evidence of this is the Danish Caricature Scandal 2005-2006. And, similar to it, the scandal with caricatures of "Charlie Hebdo", notorious for the terrorist act that followed.

Researchers of humor have long paid attention to the diversity and ambiguity of its manifestations. It can help to consolidate a group of people, smooth out conflicts and misunderstandings, and at the same time, one can use it for the purposes of bullying, mobbing and discrimination. Right away, we note that humor is not the only thing that can hurt believers' religious feelings. But the feelings of believers are not the only thing that humor can insult. Among the frequent objects of humorous insults are races, ethnic groups, sexual minorities, and even mass tragic events [1]. At the same time, the same joke can be perceived differently depending on the conditions under which, with what intention and who voiced it. So, a dark-skinned stand-up comedian can voice an anecdote about dark-skinned people for his own race members' ironic understanding. However, nothing prevents the convinced racists from telling the same anecdote to each other to reinforce their belief in the superiority of their own race. There are as many options for using humor as the number of people, people with their weaknesses, shortcomings, motives and even mental disabilities.

On the other hand, historical experience indicates that many things and phenomena can cause resentment among representatives of various religious groups and faiths — from truly outrageous works of art to scientific theories and quite fair criticism of the church clergy. Humor in this series of phenomena, at first glance, does not stand out in any way and represents something like a special case. Nevertheless, "humorous scandals" have their own specifics, the study of which we will make in our research.

II. HISTORY OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUMOR AND RELIGION

In modern society, humor is often regarded as one of the highest values of human life. We are drawn to people with a good sense of humor, we note the healing effects of laughter on our health, we respect and love famous comedians, not considering their profession as something ignoble or unworthy. Nevertheless, such an attitude most likely was not dominant for previous historical eras. Many scientific and philosophical works of M. Bakhtin, J. Lipovetsky, J. Morreall, J. Le Goff, etc. are devoted to the issues of sociocultural dynamics of humor and laughter, as well as changes in the paradigm of the attitude of society to these phenomena.

According to Bakhtin's concept, in the early stages of social development, fun and seriousness coexisted on equal terms [2]. They were equally "official" in conducting religious and public ceremonies, whether it was a victor's triumph, a farewell to deceased, or a veneration of a deity — ridicule and praise were equally present. Hence, the traditions of the ancients to laugh at funerals those are mysterious for our culture. Primitive folklore also testifies to the proximity of two forms of worldview — parody counterpart accompanies the hero. Nevertheless, as the statehood and the class differentiation of society develop, non-serious forms are increasingly being pushed back and moving to the "unofficial" level, being an expression of the popular perception of reality. The whole culture of laughter in the Middle Ages, according to Bakhtin, did not reach the level of "official", high, culture. It was out of art and philosophy, existing on the semi-legal rights of folk festivals. A small number of Renaissance writers (such as Rabelais, Cervantes, Boccaccio, and in lesser degree Shakespeare), reflected the thousand-year-old laughter culture of the people in their works, they were rather the exception in the system of universal seriousness of high literature.

The ideology of fear, sin, asceticism, the horrors of the afterlife and its inhabitants, as well as the total seriousness of religious ceremonies, lead to overcompensation in the face of the "grotesque realism" of popular laughter. "Grotesque realism" is a term that Bakhtin uses to describe a special leading form of the funny, the special aesthetics of the funny, which was characteristic to the people of the Middle Ages. The main role in the medieval grotesque is given to images of the "material bodily lower stratum" ("le bas corporel" in French, these are images of drinking, eating, sex life, defecation) [3]. Such a "decline" overthrows everything spiritual, sacred, idealized. Any hierarchy is also subjected to a "decline" or a roll over from top to bottom. This is also connected with the asceticism of the Christian culture, periods of temporary liberation from which (before or after fasting) are expressed in an effort to establish the legitimacy of town physicality.

In medieval theology, laughter and especially roar as its ultimate expression were associated with sin, aggression, low physiology and even the devil. Up until the end of the XIX century, the most researchers' focus of attention was also directed exclusively at the negative manifestations of

laughter and fun. However, the relationship of laughter and religion was not so simple and unambiguous. It was impossible to eradicate people's natural aspirations. Laughter has found its overcompensation among the masses: in carnivals, fairs, "feasts of fools" and other mass celebrations, sometimes lasting for several months and accompanied by numerous parodies of church rituals (donkey mass, scattering excrement instead of incense, the choice of the fool's father and bishop) [4]. The literary folklore of the Middle Ages deserves special attention. There is a significant "Cyprian's Supper", which ridicules the characters of Holy Scripture. Today, one would certainly tell that such a work "insults believers' religious feelings". However, starting from the IX century, this anonymous work began to be incredibly popular with the highest circles of royal authority and clergy. Fulda abbot Raban Mavr made his own version of the "Supper", and the Benedictine monk John the Deacon creates a poetic version of the "Supper" for Pope John VIII [5]. Thus, the extreme degree of medieval theology rejection in relation to laughter, a desire to suppress it, like any other need of the flesh, adjoins with amazing tolerance for laughter freedom, as well as church clergy representatives' active participation in parody and, compared to today, even blasphemous genres of funny.

Why were the medieval theologians so negatively disposed towards laughter and any of its manifestations? Perhaps their positions would be completely different if it were about modern humor. It is worth noting that we are talking about an epoch that uses the term "humor" only within the framework of the Hippocrates' "theory of humours". As the French philosopher J. Lipovetsky notes, "the entire medieval comedy is built on a grotesque image, which should not be confused with the modern parody, which is de-socialized, formal or "aestheticized" [6]. In the medieval laughter tradition, a hypertrophied body view, motives of feasts and various kinds of obscenity dominate. According to N. Truon and J. Le Goff's study, this position of laughter is associated with the denial of Christianity from the body and its needs [7]. Laughter originating from the abdomen (low part of the body) is also associated with physicality. Probably, the ban on the manifestation of physicality (the requirement of fasting, asceticism of sexual life, etc.) led to the transfer of "low" topics into a sphere of funny. Carnival provided an opportunity to violate the prohibitions of religious ideology by reflecting all the forbidden in laughter. Thus, it can be assumed that the hostility towards laughter from the medieval (at least, Western European) Church is connected with the content of medieval humor, which, in its turn, is a reaction to the bans of the Church. Thus, church ideology indirectly influences on the predominance of grotesque-bodily forms in the laughter culture, and this contributes to even greater removal of theology from laughter.

According to J. Le Goff and N. Truon, a dispraise of laughter was more characteristic to the early medieval period. Starting from about the XII century, laughter began to be gradually accepted. J. Le Goff and N. Truon explain this by saying that people "learned to control" laughter, dividing it into "good" and "bad", "divine" and "devilish" [8]. The

category of joy expressed by a smile takes on a positive meaning in a religious worldview. In the era of classicism, as noted by J. Lipovetsky, the culture of folk festivals with its inherent "grotesque" fun comes to an end; the laughter is individualized, becoming more "symbolic", "critical", "and civilized" [9]. By the end of the XIX century, the term "humor" acquires its modern meaning, and at the same time, a change occurs in the perception of this phenomenon both from the scientific and philosophical and from the philistine points of view.

The change in attitudes toward laughter and humor affected the whole society — theologians, like all the other representatives of their time, were no exception. An example of this trend is the so-called "theology of joy" - the direction in Western religious thought of the 1970s. Its representatives include E. Trueblood, H. Cox, C. Hyers, E. Greely, P. Berger, and others. At the same time, the discovery of the "Laughing World of the Old Testament" takes place [10]. A number of the theological studies are devoted to searching the Bible for not only serious meanings, but also glimpses of joyful laughter, irony, fun, as well as the comic side of famous biblical scenes. The results in these areas of theology indicate a huge potential in rethinking of laughter and humor categories, as well as their integration into the modern religious worldview. However, religious institutions are more likely to preserve traditional attitudes, which often lead to some rigidity and refusal to update in accordance with the needs of the time. From a cultural-historical point of view, such a strategy can have a very negative impact on the development of whole society [11].

III. SCANDALS BASED ON HUMOR AND RELIGION

Not many works are devoted to the study of conflicts, which are based on the clash of humor and religion. There is a significant collection of essays by the authors from the International Society for Humor Studies (C. Davis, G. Coopers, V. Raskin, E. Oring, P. Lewis, and R. A. Martin), in this works they analyze the Danish Caricature Scandal 2005-2006yy. An incident details analysis shows that in many ways religious scandals motivated by humor are no different from religious scandals motivated by, for example, works of art. Thus, according to C. Davis, the "caricature scandal" is nothing but the product of political manipulation, intentionally constructed "collective offense" [12]. No one would have paid attention to an unknown Danish newspaper if some Muslim leaders had not complained to the leaders of the Middle East. Moreover, they put oil on the fire by adding to the case illustrations of unknown origin, which were not published either by Jylland Posten or by any other title. Such activity of religious leaders, in fact, provoked not only numerous rallies and strikes, but also outbursts of cruelty from the fundamentalist-minded part of the religious community. However, the same thing happens in conflicts based on the rejection of a book, film or exhibition. Of course, the themes of freedom of speech, tolerance, and censorship play an important role in these conflicts. However, they are not specific to understanding the role of humor in such collisions. In general, we can say that any religious conflict, which is based on an insult with a joke, an object of

art or just a different religious point of view, leads to two logical consequences. The first is the growing popularity of the object around which the scandal is being built. The second is the connection to the conflict of citizens' fanatical groups with subsequent outbreaks of threats and violence from them. However, humor adds its own specifics to this kind of conflict. But what kind of specifics?

According to P. Lewis, one should seek the answer in the study of the "anti-joke" phenomenon. P. Lewis notes that most researchers of humor traditionally devote their work to the assessment of humor, which has either a positive or a neutral effect. However, the trends of recent decades have been urging us to study the effect of "anti-joke" — situations where a joke is perceived as stupid, tasteless, and even outrageous [13]. An "anti-ridiculous" reaction can be much stronger than if it were an open insult or direct criticism. For some reason, the humorous expression of an idea can hurt the most.

M. Smith, like P. Lewis, analyzes the "caricature scandal" from the "anti-joke" point of view. However, he prefers to use the term "unlaughter". "Unlaughter" is not just the absence of laughter, but the reaction of indignation that contrasts it. Characteristically, the "unlaughter reaction" to the joke can itself become ridiculous, causing a further wave of mockery [14]. M. Smith gives an example of American actor's, T. Cruise, negative reaction to the rally. T. Cruise's "unlaughter" itself became the subject of numerous jokes and parodies. Moreover, those people who were already disposed negatively towards the actor only became firmly established in their view of his personality. A similar situation occurred with Muslims in the Danish Caricature Scandal. In the eyes of Danish society, Muslims emerged as a separate group of people who do not have a sense of humor, are unable to laugh at themselves, and also possess values that are incompatible with the rest of society [15].

M. Smith connects this with the fact that humor, as well as a sense of humor, is of great value for representatives of the modern Western society. Sense of humor is the most important characteristic of the modern Western human. The presence of a sense of humor is not only highly demanded, it is necessary, and its absence or lack of it will certainly be associated with inferiority, pathology, limitation and a whole set of negative personality traits. That is why, according to M. Smith, humor is increasingly used as a test of the "Other" for strength. The group regards the "unlaughter" reaction as an unforgivable mistake of adaptation to group norms, an excessively serious attitude towards oneself, and the inability to laugh at oneself [16].

We also came across a similar study on the use of humor in American student fraternities. The author of the research, C. W. Raymond, draws attention to an amazing situation: in student fraternities, for some reason, humiliating forms of humor that exploit racial/ethnic, religious and other stereotypes flourish [17]. At the same time, there are no offended people or bullying victims. Members of the fraternity, which differ culturally and ethnically, make fun of each other, starting from the first day of joining the fraternity and up to the end of the university. What is the reason for

such a tolerance for the forms of humor, with which everyone traditionally strives to fight? Probably it is due to a trial period of 10 weeks, mandatory for all new members of the fraternity. No one who is not able to adapt to the culture of universal teasing takes root in the group. Student fraternity is built on the idea of homogeneity. According to C. W. Raymond, humorous teasing is a playful way to break down barriers that could potentially arise from ethnic, religious, cultural, or any other diversity of community members.

Thus, not only the advocates of caricatures underestimated the Muslims' wrath, but also the latter underestimated the importance of a sense of humor in modern Western society. Moreover, brutal demonstrations, igniting embassies, death threats only confirmed the stereotypes that were played in caricatures. The hidden danger of humorous scandals lies in the reputational risks of the humor victim. An "unlaughter" response to a joke is perceived as a flawed inability to laugh at oneself and as a lack of a sense of humor, which, in its turn, further exacerbates the opposition of the Other (believers — atheists, West — East, etc.).

IV. CONCLUSION

Conflicts based on the opposition of humor and religion cannot be called an independent phenomenon, they are rather only a particular case of more global problems: freedom of speech and self-expression, tolerance, and even the basic problem of the "Other" [18]. Religious conflicts on the basis of humor lead to the same consequences as conflicts on the basis of, for example, scandalous works of art — to the popularity of the subject of the conflict (whether it is a book, a film, a caricature, a joke or something else) and to the connection of fundamentalist religious groups, which negatively affects the overall image of religion and its followers.

However, humor adds an additional feature to the conflict. In modern society (at least Western), the attitude to humor is very positive, and a sense of humor is one of the most sought-after personality traits. A person without a sense of humor is perceived as flawed, difficult, limited, arrogant - in a word, more than "Other". That is why any conflicts based on humor, not only religious ones, are fraught with enormous reputational risks for that side, which, if one can say so, did not understand the joke [19]. Moreover, the "unlaughter" reaction to a joke contributes to the additional mocking in relation to the side that has demonstrated such a reaction.

We can assume that the number of religious-humorous clashes will only increase. The distrust of laughter, play, and fun in general historically exist in many religions and may lead to more conflicts. Moralizing tone and excessively serious atmosphere prevailing in the traditional religious worldview, including the Orthodox, which contrasts with the tendency for a general change in attitude (from negative to positive) to laughter and humor. A theological understanding of these phenomena, as well as its integration into the modern religious worldview, could help to reduce the number of conflict situations, the very existence of which

can negatively affect the image of the religion and its followers.

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