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**RELIGION AND HUMOUR IN MEDIA:
TOWARDS A CONFLICT PREVENTIVE NORMATIVE MODEL**

Khroul V.

This article proposes a theoretical framework for understanding and preventing conflicts arising from humorous media coverage of religion. Drawing on mediatization theory, classical theories of humour, and comparative case analysis across three distinct socio-cultural contexts: Russia, Sweden and South Africa the paper argues that the relationship between media humour and religious sensibility is structurally predictable and normatively manageable. The article surveys recent international scholarship on the humour religion nexus in digital environments, identifies Russian cases as a distinctive regulatory archetype, and synthesises empirical material from both the Global South and the Nordic context into a coherent theoretical model. The paper concludes by arguing that a conflict preventive normative model is not merely desirable but theoretically grounded and empirically achievable, provided it is anchored in context-sensitive analysis of mutual expectations between media practitioners and religious communities.

Keywords: religion and media, humour, blasphemy, mediatization, normative model, conflict prevention, digital satire, South Africa, Sweden, Russia.

**РЕЛИГИЯ И ЮМОР В МЕДИА:
К НОРМАТИВНОЙ МОДЕЛИ ПРЕДОТВРАЩЕНИЯ КОНФЛИКТОВ**

Хруль В.

В статье предлагается теоретическая рамка для понимания и предотвращения конфликтов, возникающих вследствие юмористического освещения религии в медиа. Опираясь на теорию медиатизации, классические теории юмора и сравнительный анализ кейсов в трёх социокультурных контекстах: России, Швеции и Южной Африке, автор стремится доказать, что отношения между юмором в медиа и религиозной чувствительностью структурно предсказуемы и нормативно управляемы. Статья обзорно освещает

последние международные публикации по проблеме взаимодействия юмора и религии в цифровой среде, выделяет российские случаи как самобытный регуляторный архетип и синтезирует эмпирический материал в целостную теоретическую модель. Автор полагает, что нормативная модель предотвращения конфликтов не только желательна, но теоретически обоснована и эмпирически достижима при условии её укорененности в контекстуально-чувствительном анализе взаимных ожиданий медиасубъектов и религиозных сообществ.

Ключевые слова: религия и медиа, юмор, богохульство, медиатизация, нормативная модель, предотвращение конфликтов, цифровая сатира, Россия, Швеция, Южная Африка.

Introduction

The theoretical engagement with humour and religion in academic discourse has a long, if uneven, history. Peter Berger's foundational meditation on the "comic perspective" as a form of transcendence established that laughter and the sacred are not mutually exclusive but rather 'co-present in ways that illuminate each other' [4, p. 18-19]. John Morreall's systematic taxonomy of humour rooted in the incongruity, superiority, and relief theories inherited from Kant, Hobbes and Spencer respectively demonstrated that each classical theory illuminates a different dimension of the religion–humour encounter: incongruity theory explains why the juxtaposition of the sacred with the mundane generates laughter; superiority theory accounts for the social aggression often embedded in religious satire; relief theory illuminates the cathartic function of religious comedy in high-tension communities [15, p. 132].

Yet for all their theoretical richness, these classical accounts were developed before the emergence of digital media as the dominant public sphere for religious discourse. The Danish cartoon controversy (2005-2006) and the Charlie Hebdo attacks (2015) marked the moment when the humour religion nexus became an urgent matter of media policy and conflict resolution, not merely academic philosophy.

Mediatization theory and the sacred

The most productive theoretical lens for situating the contemporary humour-religion conflict is Stig Hjarvard's mediatization theory [8; 9], which argues that religious institutions in late modern societies increasingly adapt to the logic of media rather than simply being mediated by it [13, p. 222]. Under conditions of "deep mediatisation" [q.v.: 6], the boundary between the sacred and the profane is continuously renegotiated through media platforms whose algorithmic logics privilege virality, affective intensity and incongruity precisely the formal properties that produce both humour and offence.

Ruth Tsuria has extended this framework by arguing that digital media simultaneously sanctify the profane and "profanify" the sacred, blurring the Durkheimian dichotomy that has anchored religious sociology for over a century [16,]. When TikTok users post videos from "bright rooms" claiming to report live from heaven, they are not merely making jokes: they are engaging in a mediatized negotiation of sacred categories whose stakes are perceived very differently by secular audiences and religiously embedded communities. This asymmetry of perception structurally produced by mediatisation is the central problem that any normative model must address.

Hans-Georg Geybels and Walter Van Herck demonstrated that all major world religions contain internal traditions of holy humour, irony and self-critical laughter [q.v.: 7]. The Sufi tradition of sacred clowning, the Jewish tradition of Purimspiel, the Christian tradition of Feast of Fools, the Buddhist koans that deliberately confound rational expectation all attest that humour and religion are not natural antagonists. What changes under conditions of mediatization is that these internal traditions lose control of the contexts in which religious symbols are deployed humorously and the resulting loss of framing is experienced as violation.

Recent scholarship has substantially advanced our understanding of the specific dynamics of humour-religion conflicts in digital environments. Martin, Graham and Hempelmann document the emergence of what they call "humour scandals" episodes in which algorithmically amplified satirical content generates

asymmetric responses across religious and secular audiences, often escalating into formal complaints, legal proceedings, or inter-community tension [14, p. 170-171]. Their framework identifies three structural features of such scandals: the radical decontextualisation of satirical intent by platform distribution; the collapse of the distinction between internal community humour and external mockery; and the absence of institutionalised mediation mechanisms between media producers and religious stakeholders.

The Indonesian case of the ‘#LogIn Podcast’ (2023), in which inter-religious dialogue was conducted through humour across denominational lines and went viral, offers a counterpoint: it demonstrates that humour can function as a “zone of agreement” rather than a flashpoint, provided that the communicative intent is transparent and the participants share at least minimal normative frameworks [3, p. 118]. This finding is theoretically significant: it suggests that the conflict-generative or conflict-preventive potential of religious humour is not intrinsic to the content but is a function of the relational and institutional context in which it circulates.

Sébastien Lapaque and Adekunle, working in the French and Nigerian contexts respectively have shown that stand-up comedy occupies a distinctive position in the media ecology of religious humour: its performative context live, embodied, audience specific creates interpretive frames that are stripped away in viral redistribution [12, p. 111; 2, p. 78]. The comedian performing religious satire for a shared-identity audience is doing something structurally different from the same material circulating as a decontextualized clip, yet the legal and social responses are typically addressed to the content rather than the context. This gap between the sociology of comedic production and the sociology of digital distribution is one of the key theoretical problems that a normative model must resolve.

Khanyile, examining the South African “#FundaThembi” trend, has introduced the concept of “social media sensibilities” as the operative variable in the reception of Pentecostal online humour: the same content generates radically different responses depending on whether the viewer identifies with the piety being satirised or observes it from outside [10, p. 880]. This finding extends the incongruity theory of humour by

locating the production of incongruity not in the text but in the identity position of the audience a crucial insight for normative model design, since it implies that conflict prevention requires audience analysis, not merely content regulation.

Russian cases: humour, blasphemy, and the weaponisation of the sacred

Russia presents a paradigm case of inversion in the historical relationship between state, media, and religious humour. During the Soviet period, the satirical magazines *Krokodil*, *Perets* and *Vozhyk* produced institutionalised anti-religious humour as an instrument of ideological modernisation: the sacred was systematically subjected to incongruity-based ridicule in service of a secular utopian project. This tradition created a rich repertoire of satirical conventions directed at Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and other religious communities that persisted in popular memory long after the Soviet collapse.

The post-Soviet reversal has been abrupt and structurally significant. With the reconstitution of the Russian Orthodox Church as a primary institution of national identity under V. Putin, religious satire particularly directed at Orthodoxy has been progressively recategorised from legitimate political commentary to criminal offence [q.v.: 1].

The Russian case has three implications for the normative model. First, it demonstrates that the relationship between religious community and media is not naturally dialogical but is shaped by legal-political architecture: where the state provides institutional incentives for religious communities to file complaints rather than engage in dialogue, a normative model based on mutual concession will be systematically undermined. Second, it reveals the latent political instrumentality of religious offence as a legal category: the normative model must therefore include provisions for distinguishing genuine community grievance from organised political use of religious sentiment. Third, and most productively, the Soviet counter-tradition of “holy humour” as political resistance offers a historical precedent for the reappropriation of satirical conventions within democratic frameworks: laughter directed at the sacred has historically served as a mechanism of democratic self-defence, not only as a vector of conflict.

South African cases: Ubuntu and liberative humour

South Africa constitutes a theoretically distinctive site for the study of religion-media humour conflicts for several reasons. With 85% of the population professing religious belief, distributed across Pentecostal, Zionist Christian, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish and indigenous African traditions, the country operates as a laboratory of sacred multiplicity in a single constitutional democracy. Section 16 of the Constitution protects freedom of expression while Section 15 guarantees protection of religious and cultural rights, creating a normative tension that courts and media practitioners are required to navigate in real time.

The Ubuntu ethic – the philosophical framework of human interconnectedness summarised in the phrase “I am because we are” – provides a cultural resource for conflict resolution that has no direct equivalent in either the Russian or Swedish contexts. Where Nordic Lagom invokes horizontal equality as the ground of mutual tolerance, and Russian sacred nationalism invokes vertical hierarchy as the ground of deference, Ubuntu grounds the relationship between humour and sacred sensibility in the relational responsibility of community members to one another. This provides a distinctive basis for the “zone of agreement” that the normative model requires.

The “Funda Thembi” phenomenon (2022-2025) offers a paradigm case of the structural dynamics identified by Martin, Graham and Hempelmann [14]. A video of Pentecostal congregant Thembi fervently reading scripture, originally circulated within a community context of shared devotion, was extracted from that context and recirculated as viral comedy. The Pentecostal community’s response (“evil, unholy and morally atavistic”) reveals the decontextualisation effect: what was an internal expression of sacred intensity became, from outside, a display of incongruent behaviour susceptible to superiority-theory laughter. Khanyile identifies this as the operative dynamic of ‘Pentecostal online humour’: the same content is “inside humour” for the community and “mockery” from outside it, but the digital platform distributes both readings simultaneously to heterogeneous audiences [10, p. 882].

The Rapture jokes controversy (September 2025) and the “Township Jesus” figure (April 2026) extend this analysis to two additional registers. The Rapture

controversy involves eschatological beliefs as the most “ontologically serious” domain of religious commitment, in which the temporal stakes of mockery are perceived as eternal. The TikTok user’s “live from heaven” video generated 2 million views but also articulated the fundamental asymmetry of the mediatized humour encounter: for secular audiences, incongruity-theory laughter is generated by the gap between the grandiosity of the claim (heaven) and the banality of the medium (bright room); for religious audiences, the sacred claim is not incongruous but cosmologically real, and its deployment as comedic vehicle is experienced as ontological violence. The “Township Jesus” case raises the additional dimension of suffering: when a figure evoking the passion is recruited into comedic virality, the community’s response (‘the way he was tortured and the pain he suffered has now turned into a joke’) invokes the irreducibility of sacred suffering to entertainment.

The South African project identifies a crucial counter-resource in the liberative humour tradition of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak, who deployed laughter explicitly as a spiritual practice of anti-apartheid resistance. This tradition, in which humour directed at the sacred, is an act of democratic defiance rather than impious mockery provides the “maximum zone of consensus” on which the normative model can be built. Cloete has argued that this tradition reconstitutes the social and religious value of humour as a form of communal bonding and critical reflection [5, p. 89]. The theoretical implication is significant: humour can be simultaneously critical of religious institutions and expressive of deep religious commitment, a combination that the normative model must be designed to recognise and protect.

Swedish cases: the critical humour tradition and Nordic democratic ethics

Sweden is conventionally described as among the most secularised societies in the world, yet it is simultaneously experiencing rapid religious diversification, with nearly 30% of residents having migrant backgrounds and Muslim communities constituting its fastest-growing religious group. This creates a distinctive tension: a dominant secular public culture that has historically processed religion through irony and critical distance—exemplified by the satirical tradition of Aron Flam’s mockery

of state-church relations and clerical hypocrisy, now coexists with communities for whom that same ironic register is experienced as violation.

Two cultural frameworks are operative in the Swedish context. Jantelagen – the cultural norm of egalitarianism that discourages public displays of exceptional status, including ostentatious piety, functions as a background expectation against which religious fervour appears incongruous, and therefore susceptible to humorous treatment. Lagom – the principle of appropriate balance and moderation provides the normative register within which the “zone of agreement” must be sought. These frameworks are specific to the Nordic context but have structural analogues across pluralistic democracies and can be operationalized as variables in the cross-cultural normative model.

The “Jesusbil” phenomenon (2022-2025) illustrates the same structural dynamic as the South African “Funda Thembi” case, but in a Nordic context: a Pentecostal congregant’s devotional intensity becomes viral comedy material. What is theoretically notable here is the cross-cultural structural identity of the dynamic: the same mediatisation logic operates in Johannesburg and Stockholm, distributing the same asymmetry of sacred and profane readings to heterogeneous digital audiences. This structural universality across radically different cultural contexts is one of the strongest arguments for the feasibility of a cross-cultural normative model.

The “Livets Ord” prophecy controversy (2024) adds a specifically Swedish dimension: the prosperity gospel tradition is perceived as doubly incongruous within the Swedish Lutheran and secular humanist mainstream, combining the transgressiveness of “un-Lutheran” religious enthusiasm with the specific absurdity of material blessing theology in an egalitarian culture. When a former actress prophesied the Rapture and a TikTok user responded with a “live from heaven” video, the comedic energy drew simultaneously from incongruity theory (the gap between theological claim and mundane setting), superiority theory (secular educated viewer’s distance from charismatic belief), and relief theory (the social pressure of navigating religious diversity in public space).

Nathan Söderblom's legacy in Swedish theology and the broader Frikyrkliga movement's deployment of irony as democratic spiritual practice offers the Swedish equivalent of the South African liberative humour tradition and the Soviet-era comedic resistance tradition. In all three contexts, there exists a historical memory of humour as a mechanism of critical self-reflection within religious communities, not merely external attack upon them. This convergent finding across three culturally disparate contexts suggests that the normative model's appeal to an "internal" tradition of self-critical religious humour is not a culturally parochial move but a theoretically grounded one.

Normative model: conceptual architecture

The foregoing analysis generates the conceptual architecture of a conflict preventive normative model for humour-based religious conflicts in mediated public spheres. The model rests on five theoretical propositions.

1. *Structural universality*. The conflict-generative dynamics of religious humour in digital media are structurally universal across diverse cultural contexts. The same mediatization logic decontextualisation, algorithmic amplification, asymmetric audience reception operates in Johannesburg, Stockholm and Moscow. This universality provides the theoretical foundation for a cross-cultural model.

2. *Context-specificity of resolution mechanisms*. While the conflict dynamics are universal, the normative resources for resolution are culturally specific. Ubuntu ethics, Nordic Lagom and the democratic tradition of critical humour are not interchangeable but are structurally analogous: each grounds the "zone of agreement" in a culturally intelligible value framework. The normative model must therefore be cross-culturally structured but locally implemented.

3. *Intent-effect asymmetry*. Humour conflicts between media and religion are structurally produced by the asymmetry between satirical intent (typically social criticism, democratic commentary, or community in-group bonding) and sacred effect (experienced as ontological violation, identity attack, or communal desecration). A normative model that addresses only content either by restricting satirical expression or by dismissing religious offence will fail to resolve this asymmetry. The model

must address the relational and institutional conditions under which intent and effect can be made mutually legible.

4. *Tradition-resource principle*. Every major religious tradition contains internal resources for self-critical humour: the liberative humour of Tutu and Boesak, the irony of Söderblom and the Frikyrkliga movement, the holy fool tradition of Russian Orthodoxy (iurodstvo). These traditions are theoretically significant because they demonstrate that the sacred is not intrinsically incompatible with laughter; what is incompatible is the extraction of sacred categories from the relational contexts in which self-critical humour is produced. The normative model should explicitly appeal to these internal traditions as grounds for community participation in dialogue.

5. *Mediation imperative*. The most actionable implication of the foregoing analysis is institutional: the absence of mediation mechanisms between media producers and religious stakeholders is the proximate cause of escalation from offence to conflict. The normative model's central practical recommendation is therefore the establishment of institutionalised, proactive dialogue mechanisms that create shared normative frameworks before conflicts arise, rather than responding to them after the fact. Such mechanisms would be analogous to press councils and media ombudsman offices, but specifically designed for the religion-media interface.

Towards empirical research: methodological pathways

The theoretical framework developed above generates a clear empirical research agenda. Three methodological axes are proposed for future investigation.

1. *Comparative corpus analysis of digital religious humour*. A cross-cultural corpus study comparing viral religious humour events in the three contexts (Russia, South Africa, Sweden) would operationalize the theoretical claim of structural universality while allowing systematic identification of context-specific variation. Functional analysis [3] combined with Critical Discourse Analysis of social media comment threads [14] would allow differentiation between conflict-generative and conflict-preventive humour episodes. Key variables would include: the presence or absence of shared community membership between humour producer and target

community; the transparency of satirical intent; the degree of decontextualisation in platform distribution; and the availability of mediation mechanisms.

2. *In-depth interviews with the interface of religion and media.* A comparative interview study with media practitioners (journalists, digital editors, satirists) and religious stakeholders (community leaders, theologians, communications officers) in all three contexts would map the “mutual expectation landscape” that the normative model must reflect. Particular attention should be given to the identification of “red lines” categories of sacred content that communities consider non-negotiable, and “grey zones” categories about which expectations are contested even within communities. The methodology would follow the focus group and interview design established in the Helsinki mediatisation of religion project, adapted for the digital humour context [11, p. 38].

3. *Normative model testing through facilitated workshops.* The ultimate empirical test of the normative model is its operationalization in facilitated dialogue between media practitioners and religious communities. Drawing on the conflict resolution methodology of “mutual concessions mapping”, workshops would be designed to surface the “zone of agreement” between parties on specific contested categories of religious humour. The three cultural frameworks identified in this paper Ubuntu, Lagom and the democratic tradition of critical humour would serve as culturally specific entry points for dialogue, while the structural model would provide the cross-cultural framework for comparison and generalisation.

Conclusion

The argument of this paper converges on a single theoretical claim: that conflicts arising from humorous media coverage of religion are not random, culturally idiosyncratic, or theoretically intractable, but are structurally produced by the mediatisation of religious life in pluralistic democracies, and are therefore structurally preventable through a normative model grounded in the analysis of mutual expectations.

The comparative analysis of three contexts the Russian case of blasphemy criminalisation, the South African case of Ubuntu-grounded liberative humour and

the Swedish case of secular egalitarianism encountering charismatic piety has demonstrated both the structural universality of the conflict dynamic and the cultural specificity of its resolution resources. These two findings are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory: it is precisely because the structure is universal that a cross-cultural model is feasible, and it is precisely because the resolution resources are culturally specific that the model must be locally implemented.

The normative model proposed here is not a set of content restrictions. It is an architecture of recognition: recognition of the structural asymmetry between satirical intent and sacred effect; recognition of the tradition-resources within religious communities for self-critical humour; recognition of the institutional absence of mediation mechanisms as the proximate cause of escalation. The model is preventive rather than reactive, proactive rather than regulatory, dialogical rather than adjudicative.

The Russian case is theoretically instructive in a final and sobering way: it demonstrates what happens to the humour–religion relationship when the normative model is replaced by its inverse, when the state provides institutional incentives for religious communities to pursue conflict rather than dialogue, and when the boundary between sacred offence and political dissent is systematically collapsed. The result is not protection of the sacred but weaponisation of it. A conflict preventive normative model is, in this sense, not merely academically desirable but democratically necessary: it is one of the institutional conditions of pluralistic public life.

The next step is empirical. The theoretical framework proposed here must be tested against real communities, real media practitioners, and real conflicts. What the theory already permits us to say with confidence is this: laughter and the sacred are ancient companions, and their encounters however fraught are navigable. What they require is not silence on either side, but the institutional architecture of mutual recognition. That architecture is what the normative model is designed to build.

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Data about the author:

Khroul Victor – Doctor of Philological Sciences, Associate Fellow of Centre for Religious Studies, Ruhr University (Bochum, Germany).

Сведения об авторе:

Хруль Виктор – доктор филологических наук, научный сотрудник Центра религиоведения Рурского университета (Бохум, Германия).

E-mail: victor.khroul@gmail.com.