

Humor appreciation as function of religious dimensions

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Abstract

Religion and specific religious dimensions have been hypothesized to reflect and have an effect on sense of humor, especially from a personality psychology perspective. Some empirical evidence tends to confirm this hypothesis, at least when behavioral (spontaneous humor creation) measure but not questionnaires are used. However, sense of humor is not restricted to humor creation, but includes other components such as humor appreciation. In the present study (based on pencil evaluation of humorous stimuli by 118 participants), as hypothesized, religious fundamentalism and orthodoxy were found to be negatively related to humor appreciation in general and to appreciation of incongruity-resolution and nonsense humor in particular, whereas religious historical relativism was positively related to appreciation of nonsense (= unresolved incongruity) humor. However, religiosity was unrelated to humor appreciation and no religious dimension predicted low appreciation of sexual humor.

Introduction

Humor and religion

The history of Christian religion, especially in the medieval period, suggests a suspicion of religion towards laughter and humor (e.g., Eco, 1983; Gilhus, 1997, for review), although, of course, expressions of humor can be found within religion, in the life of Christ and the saints (e.g., Trueblood, 1965), in the Bible (e.g., Radday & Brenner, 1990), in ascetic literature (Baconsky, 1996), in medieval sermons (Horowitz & Menache, 1994), and in contemporary charismatic groups (Gilhus, 1997). Laughter and humor, especially immoderate, ironic, and sexual humor, have been evaluated negatively in the Bible, in Patristic texts, in medieval mentality, in the Renaissance, and in modern theological texts (e.g., Derville, 1969; Gilhus, 1997; Le Goff, 1997; Ménager, 1995; but see Berger, 1997; Hyers, 1981; Kuschel, 1994, for a valorization of the comic in contemporary theology and spirituality).

Recently, Saroglou (in press-b) investigated theory and research in psychology of humor and psychology of religion, and came to the conclusion that besides this historical mistrust one can suspect that, from a psychological perspective, especially from a personality psychology one, religion may be associated negatively with, or have a negative impact on, humor in general, or some aspects of humor, in particular. A number of contrasts are in favor of this argument (see Saroglou, *ibidem*, for details).

First, people who are involved in religion tend to emphasize the need for meaning and tend to believe that the world and individual life are meaningful, have a purpose, and are worth being lived. Some of them, i.e., people with

close-minded religiosity such as religious fundamentalism and orthodoxy, may even be dogmatic, intolerant of ambiguity, experiencing discomfort with integrative complexity (at least regarding religious-existential issues), and may be submissive in an authoritarian way. On the contrary, humor presupposes recognition and enjoyment of incongruity, questions established ideas and the meaningfulness of life and reality, and is related to openness, low dogmatism, and low authoritarianism.

Second, religion seems to be animated by a need for order, closure, self-mastery, and control of self and of the world, and it is clearly related to Conscientiousness. Religion predicts conservatism and risk-avoidance. It is not then surprising that early Christian authors (e.g., Fathers of the Church) pointed out the “release of control” characteristic of laughter and humor, an aspect common to other, similarly “suspicious”, phenomena, emotions, and passions, such as dreams and anger. Indeed, humor theorists emphasize the involuntary character of humor as well as its transgressive dimension with regard to established norms, whereas empirical research suggests that humor is typical of low need for closure, low need for order, high need for play, and low Conscientiousness.

Finally, sexual and aggressive humor are major types of humor. Even, more importantly, many humor theorists following Freud argue that humor in general has a sexual connotation and that the irony-aggression-dominance dimension (often well sublimated and masked) is a substantial element of humor. Both these tendentious aspects of humor are, in some way, cautioned against and prohibited by religion.

Empirical evidence with regard to humor creation

In two recent studies (Saroglou, in press-a, Saroglou & Jaspard, 2001), the hypothesized negative relation between religion and humor received moderate confirmation, although it turned out that this relation depends on which component of humor is measured, which type (e.g., self-report vs. behavioral) of humor measure is used, which religious dimension is concerned, and what the situational factors involved are. It appeared that religion does not have any impact when people evaluate themselves in their sense of humor and use of humor as a coping mechanism in everyday life. However, with use of a more “projective” measure of behavior, it was found that, when facing stimuli presenting hassles of daily life, people high in religiosity and religious fundamentalism tend to react by less spontaneous creation of humor than people low in these dimensions, whereas people high in quest religious orientation do the opposite. Nevertheless, this finding holds true when the situational context is neutral-unclear (the goal of the experimenter is unknown) or aroused by a religious stimuli, but not when it is aroused by a humorous stimulus. Overall, it seems that people high in religiosity and religious fundamentalism retain themselves from spontaneously creating humor in neutral or serious (but not euphoric) situational contexts.

Humor appreciation as distinct from humor creation

Humor appreciation and humor creation are distinct humor dimensions (Köhler & Ruch, 1996; Thorson & Powell, 1993). Qualities related to humor creation (e.g., funniness, creativity of humor production) usually present weak or no correlations with humor appreciation, and personality traits related to humor creation are not necessarily the same as those related to humor appreciation (Babad, 1974; Koppel & Sechrest, 1970). Moreover, Köhler and Ruch (1995) found that humor production is related to appreciation of nonsense humor (unresolved incongruity) but not to appreciation of incongruity-resolution humor.

As humor appreciation, measured most often by rating funniness of cartoons and jokes, is at the present time the humor dimension that has been the most studied in empirical research, in the present study, we were interested in extending to this humor dimension the investigation of our hypothesis of a negative relation between humor and religion (Saroglou, in press-b), going beyond our findings on spontaneous humor creation (Saroglou, in press-a; Saroglou & Jaspard, 2001).

Preference of cognitive structure

Beyond humor appreciation in general and the way in which it may be related to religion, the question arises of whether religiousness is related to preference of specific humor types. Classification of humor types may vary according to different criteria such as cognitive structure of humor material. A well-established classification with a corresponding measure that has received important validity is that of Ruch (1992), which distinguishes between three humor types: incongruity-resolution, nonsense, and sexual humor.

In reference to the classic theory of humor incongruity, a series of studies over the last twenty years have been focused on the distinction between two cognitive structures: incongruity-resolution and nonsense humor. In the former type, the surprising incongruity is completely resolved, whereas in the latter type, the punch line (of a joke or a cartoon) 1) provides no resolution at all, or 2) provides a partial resolution (leaving an essential part of the incongruity unresolved), or 3) creates new absurdities or incongruities (see Ruch, 1992, for review). Appreciation of nonsense humor or preference of this humor type over incongruity-resolution humor is associated with appreciation of complex-abstract (vs. simple-representational) art representations (Ruch & Hehl, 1998), sensation seeking (Forabosco & Ruch, 1994; Ruch, 1992), and need for play (Ruch & Hehl, 1993). Conversely, appreciation of incongruity-resolution humor is related to conservatism and intolerance of ambiguity (Ruch, 1992).

Apparently, "appreciation of the nonsense structure in humor reflects a generalized need for uncertain, unpredictable, ambiguous, and complex stimuli" (Ruch & Hehl, 1998, p. 123). Consequently, it may be expected that open-minded religious dimensions such as quest orientation (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993)

or historical relativism (Hutsebaut, 1996) are associated with preference of nonsense over incongruity-resolution humor: these religious dimensions reflect acceptance of doubt, self-criticism, complexity of thought, openness to change in religious issues, and symbolic, non-literal affirmation of transcendence and faith.

Appreciation of sexual humor

A series of studies confirm the discomfort of religion with sexuality. Although some recent evidence indicates that conservative attitudes towards sex in religious people tend to decline, at least among non-conservative or not strongly religiously engaged people (e.g., Petersen & Donnerwerth, 1997), the negative association between sex and religiousness remains clear. Religiosity is related to less permissive attitudes toward premarital sex (both in Europe and the USA: Campiche, 1997; Newman & Newman, 1995), less sexual permissiveness in general (Campiche, 1997; Haerich, 1992; Wann, 1993), preference for unrevealing clothing (Edmonds & Cahoon, 1993), and less sexual attraction and fantasy towards clients among Christian therapists (Case, McMinn, & Meek, 1997). This discomfort with sexuality may be attributed to a more general antihedonistic component of religion: young religious people from different cultures and religions give low importance to the value of Hedonism (Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). It may thus be expected that religious people tend to appreciate sexual humor less than their non-religious peers do. Appreciation of sexual humor relates positively to hedonism and interest in sex, to sexual permissiveness, sexual pleasure, and sexual experience, and negatively to the antihedonism component of conservatism (Ruch, 1992).

Hypotheses

Consequently, we hypothesized that religiosity as well as religious fundamentalism and orthodoxy are negatively related to humor appreciation in general and to all humor types (incongruity-resolution, nonsense, sexual) in particular, whereas historical relativism and critical attitudes towards religion are associated with preference of nonsense humor over incongruity-resolution humor.

Method

Participants

One hundred and eighteen psychology and high school students participated in the study (53 men and 65 women). Eighty-three of them were psychology students at a Belgian (French-speaking) University and participated to by completing a research component of their introductory psychology courses, whereas the other

thirty-five participants were high school students from a general education institution. Age of participants ranged from 17 to 27.

Measures

Participants were administered the measures in the following order.

3 Witz Dimensionen Humor Test, Form A (Ruch, 1983). Form A of this test contains 35 jokes and cartoons taken from international sources. The first five are used for “warming-up” and are not scored. The remaining 30 items represent three types of humor: 1) incongruity-resolution humor, in which the punch-line resolves the surprising incongruity, 2) nonsense humor, in which incongruity is not resolved, or is only partially resolved, or creates new incongruities, and 3) sexual humor. This three-humor type taxonomy is validated in several cultures and languages, in Europe and the USA, and has demonstrated predictive validity of many external constructs (Ruch, 1992; Ruch & Hehl, 1998, for reviews). Subjects are invited to rate the “funniness” and “aversiveness” (two orthogonal dimensions) of these jokes and cartoons, using two seven-point scales ranging from *not at all* funny (or aversive) to *very* funny (or aversive). Only one joke (item 32) was impossible to translate into French and we replaced it by a similar French joke with the same sexual connotation. However, in our participants, the distributions of aversiveness scoring turned out to be highly negatively skewed (2.41, for incongruity-resolution humor; 2.08, for nonsense humor; and 1.71, for total aversiveness). We thus decided to retain for subsequent analyses only the evaluations on funniness (incongruity-resolution, nonsense, sexual, and total funniness) as well as to compute the preference of nonsense over incongruity-resolution humor (Structure preference = funniness of nonsense – funniness of incongruity-resolution humor).

Religiosity index. We used a three-item, seven-point scale that investigates the importance of God in life, the importance of religion in life, and the frequency of prayer. This index may be considered as an indicator of personal, intrinsic religion (for validity of single- or few-item scales as estimators of intrinsic religiosity, see Gorsuch & McFarland, 1972, Schwartz & Huismans, 1995; the same seems to be the case for frequency of prayer; Maltby, Talley, Cooper, & Leslie, 1995). In addition, we included a five-point (from *not at all* to *very much*) item-question on the importance-quantity of religious education received in the family: previous research indicates that in addition to religiosity *per se*, attitude towards religious education may also be informative when studying religious personality (Saroglou, 2001).

Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). This 20-item scale assesses how firmly individuals hold the belief that there is one set of religious teachings containing the basic and essential truth about humanity and God, that this truth is opposed by forces of evil and must be followed today according to practices of the past, and that those who believe in these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity. In our French translation of the scale (see Saroglou, in press-a, for details regarding minor changes), participants indicate

their agreement to the items on a six-point Likert-type format, ranging from *very strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Post-Critical Belief Scale (Hutsebaut, 1996). This questionnaire taps three religious dimensions, each represented by eight items: *orthodoxy* (believing strongly, literally, with submission to religious authority), *historical relativism* (believing in a transcendence, but in a relativistic and symbolic way), and *critical attitude toward religion* (tendency to disbelieve, but not necessarily, and in conformity with modern criticism of religion). The model is based on theoretical considerations by Wulff (1997) distinguishing respectively between a) literal affirmation of religion and of transcendence, b) restorative interpretation (conjunctive faith), and c) reductive, critical interpretation of religion. (Recent reworking of the scales provided four religious dimensions that differentially predict series of external constructs;) (Duriez, Fontaine, & Hutsebaut, 2000). In the present study, where we used our French translation of Hutsebaut's (1996) scale, we retained only the first two dimensions, because the internal consistency of the third dimension was very low (.51). Participants indicated their agreement on a seven-point Likert-type format scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics and reliability of the religion and humor variables retained for further analyses are detailed in Table 1

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and reliability of religion and humor measures

	M	SD	α
Religion			
Religiosity	18.78	10.37	.88
Relig. Fundamentalism	46.10	11.60	.75
Orthodoxy	17.42	6.27	.62
Historical Relativism	35.73	6.99	.60
Humor (Total funniness)	70.18	26.66	.91
Incongruity-Resolution	25.75	10.65	.84
Nonsense	18.47	9.74	.79
Sexual	25.85	11.46	.86

$N = 118$.

Our hypotheses received moderate confirmation. In zero-order correlations, no significant associations were found between religion measures, on the one hand,

and humor appreciation, on the other hand. However, as detailed in Table 2, in partial correlations, controlling for religious education (this variable was positively but not significantly associated with humor appreciation), religious fundamentalism was negatively correlated with humor appreciation in general and with appreciation of both incongruity-resolution and nonsense humor. Orthodoxy was also negatively correlated with humor appreciation in general and appreciation of incongruity-resolution in particular. Historical relativism was positively correlated to nonsense humor as well as to preference of this humor type over incongruity-resolution humor. However, contrary to our predictions, religiosity was unrelated to humor appreciation, and no religious dimension predicted (low) appreciation of sexual humor.

Table 2: Partial correlations between religious dimensions and appreciation of humor types, controlling for religious education

	Incongruity-resolution humor	Nonsense humor	Sexual humor	Total funniness	Structure preference
Religiosity	-.04	-.00	-.14	-.07	.11
Relig. Fundament.	-.18*	-.17*	-.10	-.18*	-.06
Orthodoxy	-.21**	-.09	-.11	-.17*	.01
Historical Relativism	.04	.26***	-.04	.10	.29***

Note: $N = 118$. Structure preference = Nonsense – Incongruity-resolution.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

With regard to the appreciation of sexual humor, we do not think that theoretical explanations contrary to our hypothesis have to be advanced, as the anti-hedonism/anti-sexual component of religiosity has been strongly confirmed empirically (see Introduction). In fact, the correlations between religiosity and appreciation of sexual humor were negative as hypothesized ($-.14$, for the total sample; $-.19$, in men; and $-.10$, in women), but, given the size of the sample, adequate statistical power to reject the null hypothesis is lacking. It is possible also that the effect size is stronger in samples not restricted to young students.

As far as appreciation of the other two humor types is concerned, the non confirmation of our hypothesis regarding religiosity *per se* may suggest that the (negative) impact of religion on humor appreciation may only be restricted to the case of close-minded religious dimensions and cannot be generalized to religion as a whole. However, given that in previous studies (Saroglou, in press-a, Saroglou & Jaspard, 2001) no evidence suggested that the (inhibitory) impact of religion on humor was greater among people high in religious fundamentalism than among people high in religiosity *per se*, further research is needed in order to clarify this issue.

Overall, the present study provides additional evidence and extends the above-mentioned previous studies investigating the “discomfort with humor” problem of religion (or some religious dimensions). Among young students living in secularized societies, religion (at least close-minded religion) seems to reflect low spontaneous humor creation and low appreciation of certain types of humor. However, we have to underline that the magnitude of the effects found is low. Nevertheless, given the fact that the contemporary religious-spiritual discourse does not necessarily evaluate humor negatively (see Introduction) and that the Christian religion seems even to valorize the ludic dimension of human existence (during the 2000 Jubilee, a specific Mass was celebrated by the Pope in honor of clowns), it is intriguing that religion is connected to personality so deeply that it seems to reach even one’s own sense of humor.

Interestingly, in line with empirical literature in psychology of humor regarding appreciation of uncertain, ambiguous, and complex stimuli (see Ruch, 1992), historical relativism predicted appreciation of nonsense humor and preference of nonsense humor over incongruity-resolution humor. This finding is in accordance with the theoretical definition of historical relativism (Hutsebaut, 1996; see also Duriez et al., 2000) as a dimension of a symbolic, non-literal interpretation of faith and, consequently, of awareness of historical relativism in faith, and of openness to change. As far as historical relativism is related to Quest (Hutsebaut, 1996), it is interesting to recall here that the quest religious orientation has been found to predict high spontaneous humor creation (Saroglou, *in press-a*).

From a methodological point of view, one question could arise for further research. In the present study, we adopted the most common research strategy in psychology of humor, *i.e.*, measuring humor appreciation by asking participants to rate the funniness of humorous stimuli. However, it could be argued that some people who really enjoy funniness of presented humor may “deny” that when they come to provide an evaluation using a pencil. On the contrary, it is also possible that some people, especially these high in social desirability, over-evaluate the funniness of the presented humorous stimuli.

Finally, the present study should be considered as exploratory and limited. Additional, intriguing questions may be investigated regarding the possible impact of religion on humor appreciation. Although, at the present time, the taxonomy of humor types we used seems to be the only one that has received large, cross-cultural validation, the psychologist of religion may be curious as to whether religiosity (and/or specific religious dimensions) can influence appreciation of humor types other than incongruity-resolution, nonsense, and sexual humor. For instance, given the important research evidence and theoretical, still open, debates on relations between religion and morality (prosocial behavior, altruism, agreeableness, forgiving, prejudice, discrimination, values) one could be tempted to advance in the psychological understanding of religion by studying appreciation by religious people of irony, sarcasm, in- vs. out-group humor, as well as didactical and philosophical humor. In other words: tell me what you laugh at, I will tell you who you are.

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