
Coffee with the Cantor

2017

Hazzan Rob Menes

Wednesdays, 11:00-12:30

<http://www.hazzanmenes.com>



Perceptions of Modern Judaism

Comedy!

How do non-Jews perceive Jewish comedy?

1. Audio Exhibits: 2000 Year Old Man
2. Rodney Dangerfield
3. Woody Allen
4. Jerry Seinfeld

Beliefnet.com

Rodney Dangerfield, Jewish Everyman

Surprising spiritual facts about the late comic who craved respect.

image: http://www.beliefnet.com/imgs/tout/story/rodney_dangerfield94x118.jpg

Rodney Dangerfield, who died on Oct. 6, 2004 at the age of 82 after heart surgery, turned his Everyman "loser" persona into a highly successful comedy routine. Below, some surprising nuggets about his life.

"Yeah, I know I'm ugly...I said to a bartender, 'Make me a zombie.' He said 'God beat me to it.'"

Dangerfield was born Jacob Cohen to a Jewish family in Babylon, L.I., New York. His father, who played in vaudeville, left the family early. Dangerfield described his mother as abusive and overbearing. He suffered from lifelong bouts with depression.

"I tell you, I don't get no respect. My mother stopped breast-feeding me as a kid. She told me she liked me like a friend."

"When I was born, the doctor said to my father, 'I'm sorry, we did everything we could but he still pulled through.'"

Although he didn't address Judaism directly in his jokes, his comic style falls well within the classic mold of Jewish humor--self-deprecating, neurotic, what Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of "Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews," calls the "distressed optimist." If there is one hallmark of Jewish humor, says Rabbi Telushkin, it is the absurd ability to keep us "laughing in order not to cry."

"I get no respect. The way my luck is running, if I was a politician I would be honest."

"My psychiatrist told me I was crazy and I said I want a second opinion. He said okay, you're ugly too."

Dangerfield mined some themes of the Jewish experience--being the outsider, sexual repressiveness, family pressures to succeed, and verbal defensiveness against aggression--to comic effect.

"I told my psychiatrist that everyone hates me. He said I was being ridiculous--everyone hasn't met me yet.."

In the classic film comedy "Caddyshack," Dangerfield portrayed Al, a boorish nouveau-riche Jew trying to buy a WASP country club. About to enter the club with an Asian friend, Al says: "I hear this place is restricted, Wang, so don't tell 'em you're Jewish, OK?"

Dangerfield appeared in two movies with religious themes. He played God in "Angels with Angles" (originally titled "Everything's George," featuring George Burns' first after-life performance as an angel trying to earn his wings). He wrote and starred in "My Five Wives," a comedy about a Mormon polygamist. Dangerfield's second wife, Joan, is Mormon. "I was inspired to write the story because my wife is a Mormon and I became fascinated with the whole polygamy thing. I thought, what a great idea for a film."

"One of the advantages of having five wives is they can't all have a headache at the same time."

"Brigham Young was said to have 27 wives. I used to have this joke, I don't care how you bring 'em, just bring 'em young."

His signature line, "I don't get no respect," struck a chord with Christian writers. It was the subject of at least one sermon ("The Rodney Dangerfield Syndrome") by a Seventh-Day Adventist minister. And a review of the book "Christian America" noted, "Like Rodney Dangerfield, evangelicals don't get much respect, and 'remain one of the last social groups in the United States that people can speak disparagingly about in public and get away with it.'"

image: <http://images.beliefnet.com/imgs/tout/mimiquotetop2.gif>

Jewish Comedy: A Serious History

By Jeremy Dauber

W. W. Norton & Company, 416 pages, \$28.95

Jews are hilarious. We know this, or at least think we do. Just look at all the Jewish cut-ups out there. At the moment, Judd Apatow, Jenji Kohan, Amy Schumer and Sarah Silverman are some of the top performers and writers on the contemporary American scene. The out-sized achievements of comic Jews have spawned a decades-long search to explain our success.

Recently, we've had "No Joke: Making Jewish Humor" (2013), "God Laughed: Sources of Jewish Humor" (2014), and "Kvetching and Shpritzing: Jewish Humor in American Popular Culture" (2015). A special issue of a scholarly journal appeared under the title "A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World" (2016). I warn you, it's not very funny.

Then there are the cinematic elegies to American Jewish humor, "When Jews Were Funny" (2013) and "When Comedy Went to School" (2013). Now, Columbia University professor Jeremy Dauber follows up on his award-winning 2013 biography, "The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem," with his own attempt to tell the story of Jewish humor. Soon we'll need a book or a film (or at least this review) to explain the appearance of all these books and films.

Dauber examines how Jews in different places and eras have responded with humor to a variety of experiences, including anti-Semitism, assimilation and life in the Diaspora. His chapters are all variations on themes, or, as he calls them, "conceptual rubrics." That phrase is one of the few intrusions of academese into a work that manages to be both erudite and breezy in its handling of history.

Short excursions into Jewish history are leavened by his retelling of numerous jokes throughout. And Dauber can be downright funny himself. At one point he characterizes Philip Roth's "Operation Shylock" as "John le Carré if everybody involved had gone to... City College rather than Oxbridge." Dauber deftly summarizes issues that would threaten to bog down a less capable writer. Rabbinic debates, medieval poetics and Nazi jurisprudence all receive economical treatment that provides context without overwhelming the reader. I teach a course on American humor, yet Dauber's breadth left me breathless and his depth left me in his debt.

Each chapter opens with an extended discussion of the use of humor in The Book of Esther before soaring — at times dizzily — through the next two millennia or so. Dauber continually deepens the reader's engagement with the biblical Jewish comedy of errors, while also demonstrating connections between recent comedy and ancient wellsprings of humor. The narrative form of "Jewish Comedy" is unusually complicated for a general audience book, but it has the benefit of conveying a version of the traditional Jewish sense of circular time. As its full title promises, this is a profoundly Jewish and serious — though never stiff — work.

Dauber's final and perhaps best chapter, "Jewish Comedy — Hold the Jewishness," opens with a discussion of how Esther "spends much of the book that bears her name in disguise." He

suggests that this concealment ultimately reveals the impossibility of “attempts to define and isolate the nature of Jewish identity.” From this rather metaphysical speculation on Jewish essence, Dauber winds his way through an earthy discussion of Renaissance-era Hebrew farce, a Yiddish chivalric tale, Sholem Aleichem’s “On Account of a Hat” — which he calls the “greatest Jewish short story ever written” — and on to Franz Kafka’s absurdist humor of horror. Dauber even manages to compare Gregor Samsa’s embarrassment at his metamorphosis to the excruciating sight of Ben Stiller’s genitalia stuck in a zipper in “There’s Something About Mary.” And that’s only half the chapter.

I especially appreciate Dauber’s audacity at comparing Kafka to gross-out humor. I like to point out to my own students the simian parallels between Kafka’s famed short story, “A Report to an Academy,” and a favorite episode of “The Phil Silvers Show,” called “The Court Martial” and starring Zippy the chimp. Here are Kafka and slapstick again. But incongruity, as any humor scholar knows, is a necessary condition for humor.

Dauber reads (and watches) widely and well, and is willing to go against the grain of academic decorum in order to challenge received wisdom. Even the footnotes to “Jewish Comedy” surprise: The Jewish co-writer of “Annie Hall” came up with the Swedish Chef for the Muppets? Will Rogers learned Yiddish? Tom Lehrer might have invented the Jell-O shot?

Yet despite my genuine admiration, the book fails to ask, let alone answer, a question that should be at the heart of any discussion of the topic by an American scholar steeped in literature and culture. What is it about Jewish humor — however broadly we define it, and Dauber defines it extremely broadly — that has made it so popular in the overwhelmingly Christian United States? How is it that “Portnoy’s Complaint” plays in Peoria, Illinois? I think the answer has to do with the fortuitous coincidence between the central character-type of American humor in the late 19th century — the bumbling, put-upon, luckless “little man” — and the dominant character-types of Yiddish folk and literary humor at the time: the schlemiel, the schlimazel and the luftmensch. Simply put: Jewish humor and American humor intermarried about 120 years ago. But where Dauber sees the persistence of Jewish humor across the subsequent generations, I see an indifference to Jewish particularity.

If Dauber is the Hillel of humor, I hold by humor’s (non-Jewish) Shammai, the late British scholar Christie Davies. Decades ago, Davies conducted a content analysis of jokes and concluded that there remains little identifiably Jewish about Jewish humor, except the threat or fear of no longer being identifiably Jewish due to apostasy, assimilation or masquerade. In other words, Jewish humor is just like every other kind of humor, except for its obsessive concern over Jews disappearing. And if that’s the case, this explains the recent appearance of all those books and films by scholars and documentarians who explain the phenomenon of Jewish humor. They work against the growing shadow of a vanishing tradition of identifiably Jewish humor.

Adam Rovner is an associate professor of English and Jewish literature at the University of Denver and is the author of “In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands Before Israel” (NYU Press, 2014).

Read more: <https://forward.com/culture/film-tv/386283/in-a-predominantly-christian-country-why-is-jewish-humor-so-popular/>

Why Are Jews Funny?

By MARK HOROWITZ DEC. 1, 2017

JEWISH COMEDY

A Serious History

By Jeremy Dauber

364 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. \$28.95.

Were Jews always funny? For most of their history they had a reputation, at least among their gentile neighbors, for being humorless and glum. But [in 1978, Time magazine](#) claimed that 80 percent of all stand-up comedians in the United States were Jewish. So either Jews got funnier, or they were just funny all along and nobody noticed.

There are plenty of theories to explain Jewish humor — most devised by Jews. Saul Bellow, channeling his inner Kierkegaard, thought Jewish humor combined “laughter and trembling.” [Freud](#) believed Jewish humor was a defense mechanism: a form of sublimated aggression that lets victims of persecution safely cope with their condition. Or as Mel Brooks put it: “If they’re laughing, how can they bludgeon you to death?”

In “Jewish Comedy: A Serious History,” the Columbia professor Jeremy Dauber skates through more than 2,000 years of material without ever settling on one overarching theory. Instead, in the manner of a field biologist, he lays out a detailed taxonomy of Jewish humor: seven categories to cover everything from the Book of Esther to “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” with one chapter devoted to each category. There’s a chapter for humor about anti-Semitism; one for satirical humor; one for highbrow wit and wordplay; another for theological or philosophical humor; and a vaguely defined catchall subgenus, the comedy of disguise, that somehow covers all the work of Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, the Marx Brothers and Jerry Seinfeld.

Instead of a chronological history, Dauber’s systematic approach samples Jewish history from beginning to end in each chapter, with illustrations from the Bible, 18th-century Yiddish drama and Lena Dunham’s “Girls.” Then he rewinds the tape for the next chapter, and starts again. Seven times. It makes for frustrating and repetitive reading. “The Bible,” as Dauber eventually confesses, “is not funny,” but that doesn’t stop him. Is the Book of Esther amusing enough to warrant seven different exegeses? Funny you should ask. What starts out as a quirky conceit rapidly devolves into an annoying tic. Because of all the circling back, Dauber tries to keep readers oriented with awkward phrases like “as we’ve mentioned earlier,” “we’ve already spoken about,” “we’ve already encountered Rabbi Gamaliel in an earlier chapter,” or this: “Considering Jews and space leads us back to [Woody Allen](#).”

Nonetheless, this narrative straitjacket doesn't keep Dauber, a serious scholar of Yiddish and Hebrew literature, from making original points along the way. There are thoughtful mini-essays on Philip Roth and Kafka, for example. On Kafka, Dauber argues that his subversive comedy is distinctly Jewish because it mocks the pretensions of scientific certainty that papers over the irrational forces controlling our lives. Kafka's stories convey "the monstrously misunderstood distortions peeking out, in a way so horrible that you just have to laugh."

Dauber's preferred subject, though, is contemporary Jewish-American film and television comedy. Larry David's work gets more attention than Kafka or Roth. Unfortunately, most of the commentary on figures like David, Jerry Lewis, Mike Nichols and Judd Apatow is not particularly new or original. He's better when he sticks to the areas where he holds a scholarly advantage. The fascinating but too-brief sections on 18th- and 19th-century Yiddish drama are startling. Who knew how much German-Jewish comedy was focused on mocking the more pious Jews of Eastern Europe, ridiculing them as foolish, corrupt and sexually perverse country bumpkins. The Jewish minority in Berlin were betting on assimilation and acceptance, trying to distance themselves from their more alien landsmen to the east. Though, in retrospect, who were the bigger fools?

This is where the absence of any grand unifying theory feels like a cop-out. Dauber is more comfortable with the triumph of Jewish-American comedy than with the dreary denouement of the European branch. He quotes Freud's sly observation, "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of their own character," but he's reluctant to dig too deeply into this masochistic strain in Jewish humor. You'll find more nuance in [Ruth Wisse's book](#), "No Joke: Making Jewish Humor," which covers the same ground, but with a greater willingness to probe the ways in which Jewish humor made too much of a virtue out of weakness and passivity.

"What shall I do when laughing is a kind of illness for me?" the great Yiddish humorist Sholom Aleichem asked. He embraced Zionism, partly as a way out of the trap, and certainly the Jewish state is a test for most theories of Jewish humor. What happens when Jews are no longer a persecuted minority? Can a well-armed majority still be funny?

Yet there are only a few pages about Israel here, mostly unenthusiastic. No mention of classic bits by Arik Einstein and Uri Zohar, or the political satire of contemporary television shows like "Eretz Nehederet" and "Hayehudim Baim" (check out [their take on the Book of Esther](#) on YouTube!). He ignores the recent Israeli hit film "[Zero Motivation](#)," a comedy about bored young women in the Israel Defense Forces (optioned for American adaptation by

Amy Poehler), and skips younger authors like Etgar Keret and Assaf Gavron, whose 2014 novel, [“The Hilltop,”](#) is a remarkably dark and sardonic portrait of the settler movement.

But if Dauber is as worried as he claims to be that as American Jews assimilate, Jewish-American comedy will become less distinctively Jewish and more generically American — something he warns of in his concluding pages — all the more reason for a serious scholar of Jewish comedy to turn east.

Mark Horowitz is a former editor at Wired magazine and The New York Times.

Nyblueprint.com

Seinfeld 25 years later: what made it so funny?

Was it Jewish humor that drove audiences wild?

Alan Zeitlin | Arts and culture editor | Television | 07/11/2014

No offense, but if you aren't a fan of the show “Seinfeld,” something's wrong with you. Actually, you can take offense if you want. Prefacing a sentence with no offense actually often means you are about to say something offensive. I could have also said, “Don't take this the wrong way,” but that's pretty much the same thing.

There were fears that “Seinfeld,” initially called “The Seinfeld Chronicles,” might be taken the wrong way, with humor that might be too Jewish in the eyes of some, for instance. As we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the show, which became a true hit in its fourth season, (perhaps it ran on Jewish time?) it is worth examining why it was such a hit.

For all its legendary writing by Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David and the inimitable ensemble of Seinfeld, Michael Richards, Jason Alexander and Julia Louis-Dreyfus, as Jerry, Kramer, George and Elaine, it was perhaps the bizarre and hilarious questions that arose in the episodes. What do you do if a couple invites

you over to see their baby and the baby is ugly? What if you drop a Junior Mint into the body of a man during surgery? Is a dentist who converts to Judaism allowed to suddenly make Jewish jokes? Are Jewish grandparents in Florida the most stubborn but funny people in the world? Would your luck change if, for every decision you had to make, you chose the opposite of what your instincts told you?

This sort of questioning from Seinfeld and David made the show a hit among rabbis.

"It reminded us to look at life with a question mark," said Rabbi Charlie Klein of Merrick Jewish Center, who officiated at Seinfeld's wedding. "It encouraged us to look at life with another eye. It made up step back and think, 'Why am I really doing this?' It was magic on television."

Rabbi Moshe Grussgot of Congregation Ramath Orah on the Upper West Side said he's a huge fan of the show's construction.

"It really had a Talmudic base in the way it was so nitpicky and asked so many questions including the smallest and seemingly unimportant things," Grussgot said. "It was always funny to see how things that seemed totally unrelated were intertwined."

He said his favorite character was Kramer for his wild antics and for being the show's "moral conscience."

Rabbi Joe Potasnik of the New York Board of Rabbis said it was good to see a show whose central character was Jewish.

Though Jerry's religion was seldom overtly acknowledged, Potasnik feels that Seinfeld's success reflected increasing acceptance of Jews in mainstream American society.

"It showed that America was comfortable with Seinfeld the Jewish comedian and it showed that we're very blessed to be in this country," he said.

Food-related problems and jokes were common on the show. My grandfather, upon eating his wife's or my mother's chicken soup, would say the soup was "a meal in itself." I never knew why but found it funny. This was before the show ever aired.

In one episode, a man named Bania gives Jerry an Armani suit and wants to be taken out for a meal in exchange. They go to Mendy's and Bania orders a soup and wants to be taken out another time, claiming that soup doesn't count as a meal. Jerry says it does. In an interview, owner Mendy Merel weighed in.

"Our soups are considered by many customers to be a meal," said Merel, who is also celebrating the 25th anniversary of his restaurant's opening. "Some are thick, it's a good portion, and if you sit down and have some bread with it some people are done for the day."

Merel said there was a tremendous response from people who saw the show, even though it was actually filmed in Los Angeles and a signed cast picture is on display at his 34th Street location.

"Seinfeld" featured some controversial moments, from the "Soup Nazi" who would refuse to give soup to people who didn't order it the right way, to Jerry making out with a woman during "Schindler's List," to an episode called "The Contest," where the characters competed to see who could abstain from a certain type of sexual act the longest.

Yes, the finale could have been funnier. But that's being nitpicky. The show was an equal opportunity offender, lampooning every race, every religion, and every ethnicity as well as the young and the old.

With all the chaos in the world, it's easy to lose our minds. Seinfeld was a good escape. I can't help but think of the scene where George's father, played by Jerry Stiller yells, "Serenity now!"

Will there ever be a show like this again?

That's a question to which we already know the answer.

God's Comics: Inside the World of Christian Stand-Up

A dreadlocked Jew from Brooklyn walks into the Christian Comedy Association's annual conference to tell a few jokes...

Harmon Leon

Jul 1 2015, 12:00am

The first thing you notice at a **Christian** stand-up comedy gathering is that everyone is so damn nice. They are nice even when a dreadlocked Jew from Brooklyn steps on stage, clearing his throat, and starts telling jokes. I know this because that dreadlocked Jew from Brooklyn was me.

I was on stage at His Hands Church in Woodstock, Georgia, delivering a bunch of Jesus jokes I'd written in my hotel the night before:

"I used to play in a Christian punk band. We were called the No Sex Before Marriage Pistols."

"I have an atheist friend. The only problem is, I don't believe he exists."

I had come here for the Christian Comedy Association's annual conference to learn everything there is to know about the sub-genre. Roughly 100 Christian comedians from around the country had gathered inside the church for the two-day conference, where there would be workshops, prayers, networking, and performances—all aimed at serving God through humor.

"All the jokes, all the workshops, all the meetings are nothing without the Lord by your side," said Kenn Kington, the CCA's president, who kicked off the comedy conference. "Let us follow you Jesus."

A Bible passage from Corinthians appeared on a large screen, and the comedians bowed their heads in a prayer: "Father, thank you for the way you gifted us... It's only through the gift of Jesus that we do this for you."

In this alternative comedy universe, Christian stand-up comedians are stars in their own holy stratosphere. Some have sold multi-platinum records, yet are virtually unknown to the mainstream comedy world. Their routines use all the same ingredients of stand-up, with one difference: Their comedy is a vehicle to serve God.

"I perform wherever I can," said a newbie comedian who had traveled from California to be at the CCA conference. "Youth groups, churches, open mics..."

"Do you do mainstream clubs?" I asked, as we congregated near the food table.

"Yes, but I have to plug my ears," he said. "Everyone is just trying to be dirty for the sake of being dirty. Even Chris Rock says you have to start out clean."

He had a point. Two nights before I arrived at CCA, I had gone to a comedy show in Atlanta where someone did a bit about his cat lapping up fresh cum after sex with his partner. There wasn't even a joke attached.

Christian comedy, by contrast, is squeaky-clean, Jesus-centered, and often tied to an inspirational message. There are, needless to say, no dick jokes. From what I'd seen, it's mostly made up of observational humor about things Christians do, like go to church or do chores for their wives. As Kington explained at the beginning of the conference, "Our entire purpose is so we can be around others who are doing this and see why God gave us this crazy gift. And that really is what this is."

Within the Christian comedy circuit, that crazy gift can mean good money. Headliners can reap \$1,500 to \$2,500 per church comedy show—which adds up, since there are more churches than comedy clubs. Comics can move up the ranks quickly, since there's a limited pool of comedians and each church has hours of programming to fill.

"Almost every year, there's somebody here that came just to learn about comedy and try to get bookings in churches because clubs are drying up," said Gordon Douglas, the CCA chaplain. "If you're doing this Christian comedy out of the love of God and because he called you to it, you will know his joy and peace."

I wasn't sure I knew what he meant, but I nodded.

"We do no different in the church world than what every evangelist has done since I was a kid," said Chonda Pierce, one of the biggest stars in Christian stand-up comedy. "They have a funny story at the very start—they're trying to capture the audience's attention so they can set them up and deliver their sermon. So that's what I do."

Pierce, who started her career as a Minnie Pearl impersonator, is now repped by the same manager as Billy Crystal and Woody Allen. Still, no one in Hollywood has heard of her because of this niche circuit. "I got an award this year as the most gold and platinum awarded female comic in history—in any genre." She recalls the award presenter leaning over and saying, "I've never heard of ya!"

It's not surprising. For the past 25 years, Pierce has been selling out shows in towns with names like Sedalia, Zionsville, and Silsbee. "In the Christian comedy world, as far as the church goes, being a woman is a plus," she said about the large ratio of females on the circuit. "To get a bunch of guys to come out and hear you is pulling teeth for a church. To get a bunch of women to come hear a woman comedian—they'll just come in mini-vans! My audience has the checkbook; your audience has to have permission to leave the house!"

In the late 90s, Pierce held the very first CCA conference on her 100-acre farm in rural Tennessee (nicknamed "The Funny Farm"). A woman from LA participated in the gathering and asked Pierce how to get more comedy work at churches. "I said, 'Well, the first thing I'd start doing is wear a bra.' I was very sincere in saying that."

We all know that nobody is going to buy a ticket if all it says is: 'A Bunch of People Are Going to Talk About Jesus Tonight for \$25.' – Chonda Pierce

For Pierce, being a Christian comedian means "at some point in the night, you want your audience to make a decision. That's what Christianity is: We have made a decision to believe Jesus."

She explained that could take the form of coming to Jesus, preaching the Bible, or loving one another as the Lord has loved us. "Whatever that is, we're going to have a moment of purpose." To her, the distinction is using stand-up comedy as a spiritual vehicle rather than using Christianity as the purpose behind her comedy. "We all know that nobody is going to buy a ticket if all it says is: 'A Bunch of People Are Going to Talk About Jesus Tonight for \$25.'"

"People feel afraid of the title," Pierce said of being a Christian stand-up. "It grieves me when I realized later on that it was causing me limitations."

True, the mainstream comedy world doesn't know what to make of Christian comedians. A week earlier, I asked secular comedian Brendon Walsh his take. "It's the same thing that comes to mind when I hear the term 'Christian Rock,'" he said. "It's like something that this specific group wants, but they can't have the real thing because it doesn't agree with their beliefs. It's like being lactose intolerant. You still want ice cream because it's great, but you can't have it because it makes you shit your pants. So they make their own crappy version of it that won't make them shit themselves, but it's just not the same."

Comedian **Doug Stanhope** had a harsher take: "There is no question that religion is born in power and control," he said. Stanhope feels that this ideology spills over into Christian standup comedy. "Their followers are guilty of trying to find an easy answer, whether it's in a book, a sermon—or even a joke—rather than question the quandary of life on their own terms."

This view toward Christian comedy can make it difficult for Christian comedians to perform in secular clubs. It breaks Pierce's heart to see Christian comics compromise their material when they perform in mainstream comedy clubs. "Not only does it grieve me," she said, "but I think it also grieves the Father. I think he says, 'Please be the same person that you are.'" Fearless to the faith, Pierce doesn't compromise: "I tell the exact same jokes as I do at the Grand Ole Opry as I do at the First Baptist!"

For the most part, her comedy does crossover in the parts of the country where Larry the Cable Guy and the Blue Collar Comedy Tour would play. She's also toured with Wanda Sykes on a USO tour of Afghanistan—though she was strictly told not to talk about Jesus.

Pierce was diagnosed with clinical depression after the death of her husband in 2014 and the recent suicide of a close pastor. She now uses her comedy at her ministry to speak to those who might be going through the same thing: "That's what the Lord had designed for me to do."

Because of this, she sees spirituality as intrinsic to her comedic success. "If you're here because you eat, sleep, and dream your craft, you are going nowhere. You might succeed for a while, but you will eventually crash and burn and have

nothing," she said during one conference event. "Hold your path and deliver the best comedy that you can but don't forget your Father. I can't take you all on and change your career, but I can invite the Holy Spirit into your life and pray for you."

"A Christian comedian is someone who wants to honor God every time they go on stage," explained a man who goes by the name Nazareth. "You can be in a prison. You can be in a strip club. It doesn't matter. If you're performing, you want to honor God—then God will find a way to honor himself through that."

His favorite joke: "How do you get Holy Water? You boil the Hell out of it."

Born in Kuwait, Nazareth started his comedy career in the early 90s, performing in clubs alongside the likes of Chris Rock, Adam Sandler, and Kevin James. Then, three years into his stand-up career, he found his comedy calling: "I gave my life to Christ. I left the clubs and was going to go back to accounting. And God said, 'No, I want you to use this for me.' So I said, 'Can I honor you?' And he said, 'Yes!'"

In 1992, Nazareth fasted for 40 days, at which time, he says God told him to rent a stadium to put on a Christian comedy concert and start his production company: Comedy Crusades. Now, no matter where he performs—whether it's a mainstream comedy club or a corporate event—Nazareth uses the comedy stage as his pulpit to spread the word of Jesus.

"I've headlined the Tempe Improv on a regular night," he said. "I ended up giving an invitation to Christ at the event. Honoring Him allowed me to do it. When you honor God with your comedy, he will use you regardless!" He hopes to one day perform the Rose Bowl, alongside other Christian comedians.

At the conference, Nazareth was leading a workshop on getting more bookings. Before he began, the comedians' bowed their heads again: "Father we do it for you and we do it for humor..."

For them, praying is not just a ritual—Nazareth says he's secured more bookings through prayer than anything else. He offered practical advice to the group: "Say, 'Lord, I'm serious about this comedy. I'm serious about this performing. Can you please open the doors for me? Would you please give me a gig? I need a gig on Sunday.'"

Through this method, Nazareth says he's gotten last minute gigs filling in for vacant pastors. "God opens the doors," he said. In the past, he's also played the "Jesus card"—telling everyone he's a Christian—as a strategy for scrounging up business. Once, he says, he told the man sitting next to him on an airplane that he was a Christian who performed comedy shows to spread the gospel. "I booked a \$10K gig on the plane."

No matter what faith, making a living as a comedian ain't easy. It involves the constant need of approval and a lot of rejection. In the Christian comedy world, Nazareth recommends a few pointers, such as "stalk your clients." Cracking the Christian comedy market is all about schmoozing—except it's done with pastors rather than booking agents. Nazareth suggested the strategy of Googling all the churches in a given area, and then to "drive to their church on a Sunday, shake their hand after the service, and sell them on your comedy."

When all else fails, Nazareth says to use God's forces, and prayer, to get the job done. For example, if James Dobson, head of Focus on the Family, is appearing at a nearby church and there's a storm in his home base of Colorado, you should call the church and say, "If he won't be able to make it, I'm there!"

But most importantly: "Don't ever associate your calendar with your self-worth," Nazareth advised. "Times when I didn't have a lot of work I felt like a loser. Your self-worth is with God."

Unlike mainstream comedy gigs, where deprecation is part of the routine, there's a sense of resounding support within the Christian comedy circuit. "They don't really heckle in churches," said Brian Smith, part of the comedy musical duo Dave and Brian.

That's an advantage of performing on the Christian stand-up comedy circuit: Occasionally you get someone shouting out "Rebuke!"—an Old Testament reference to disapproval—but for the most part, church crowds are good. Instead of drunk heckles, they usually show passive-aggressive disdain by plastering on a tense smile.

I asked Smith what made a successful Christian comedy routine.

"Talk about mother-in-laws," he said. "Talk about kids."

"What about shopping at Home Depot?" I suggested, remembering how many stand-up performances on the first night at the conference involved that *hilarious* scenario.

Smith added a big hackneyed Christian comedy standard: "Talk about the differences between white churches and black churches." That, he said, would bring down the house.

Later at the conference, a comedian called Bone Hampton got on stage to provide tough love to the new comedians. You could tell Bone crushes it in any room he plays; he's even performed in a fair number of mainstream clubs, and has appeared on *The View* and *My Name is Earl*.

Bone takes a different attitude to the current biggest star in comedy: "This is the hardest thing I struggle with these LA comics: 'Louis CK is fearless; he'll say anything. I love Louis CK because there's nothing he won't say.' That doesn't make you better than us! Because there's some stuff you ain't supposed to say!"

Applause. There were a few shouts of "amen."

"There's some stuff the Lord would tap you on your shoulder and say, 'That's not on the stage I put you on! That's not coming out your mouth to my people!' That's the thing I say about being a Christian comic—don't get caught up with we won't say stuff. We don't do shock; we're not trying to shock people. We do funny!"

Metaphorically, Bone dropped the mic.

In the beginning, intent on learning all that I could about Christian comedy, I had signed up for the Christian comedy competition. Before I got onstage, I was nervous as hell. I couldn't do the joke about "having a threesome with a pair of Siamese twins attached at the vagina," or referring to the audience as "a bunch of divorced dads sleeping in a motel while their ex-wives are being finger-banged by a fitness instructor named Hovig." Cross those off the list. I had to make these people laugh with clean, crafted jokes.

Everyone got three minutes to perform their best material. There were jokes about weight loss. A guy pointed out that people abducted by UFOs are usually stupid. One woman pulled out a pair of electric nose clippers and proceeded to use the device. A bald guy put on his best Ching-Chong-Ding-Dong voice and performed an impression of a cat-eating chef at a Chinese restaurant. Another comic launched into a bit about how, when he was 16, he couldn't take his 19-year-old wife to prom—though he didn't expand upon getting married at 16, as if that was some sort of given.

I opted for silly, surreal religious jokes that I had written on a napkin: "I used to be a Mormon comedian. Here's a joke from my act, 'Take one of my wives, please... because I have several... because I'm a Mormon...'"

The votes were tallied, and—by the grace of God, I suppose—I had sealed my position in the big evening Christian stand-up comedy show.

The author performing his Christian stand-up routine. Video courtesy of **J. Drake Productions**

In the end, it was me, the Jew, who stormed the Christian stand-up comedy showcase. It was surprisingly fun—we were all just telling jokes, messing around on stage, and making people laugh. That's the world of comedy. Every good comedy set is like a religious experience, though mine just happened not to be attached to a big magical invisible man in the sky.

"I've never seen comedy done like that before," said a comedian from Des Moines after my act.

"Do you mostly perform at churches?" asked a comic from Philly.

Bone walked by. "Good job!"

It made me realize: This was really just a room full of other comedians, and comedians are all from the same island of misfit toys—God-fearing or otherwise. We end complaining about stuff, dissecting the crowd, and generally acting slightly jaded. And, judging by the amount of business cards handed to me, I think I could actually have a career on the Christian comedy circuit; all I would have to do is sign on the dotted line for Jesus.

Do We Miss the Humor of Christ When We Read the Gospels?

By Randy Alcorn | August 5, 2016

Few of us are familiar with the culture Jesus lived in. In our culture, most humor is based on joke telling, verbal ambiguities, and physical comedy. Jewish humor often employed witty hyperbole—clever, startling, over-the-top statements—to get a laugh. Though some comedians today do this and we laugh, when we see Jesus use the technique in the Gospels, we usually don't get it. Jesus certainly never employed the caustic humor of late-night comedians who ridicule the weak minded or the unfortunate. But He did make hypocrites in positions of power the brunt of his wit.

In *The Humor of Christ*, Elton Trueblood argued,

There are numerous passages . . . which are practically incomprehensible when regarded as sober prose, but which are luminous once we become liberated from the gratuitous assumption that Christ never joked. . . . Once we realize that Christ was not always engaged in pious talk, we have made an enormous step on the road to understanding.^[1]

Did humor come into the universe as the result of sin? No. As I share in my book *Happiness*, we have a sense of humor because as His image bearers, we are similar to God, who enjoys laughter.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* says, “Jesus was a master of wordplay, irony and satire, often with an element of humor intermixed.”^[ii] Jesus makes many serious points in humorous ways. “Are grapes gathered from thornbushes?” He asks, “or figs from thistles?” ([Matthew 7:16](#)). People who worked the ground in that culture surely smiled at the self-evident answers. When encountering a verse such as this one, which instructs us not to “cast your pearls before swine” ([Matthew 7:6, NKJV](#)), a modern reader might wonder why anyone would even think to do such an outlandish thing. But that's the whole point—no sane person would! Therefore, Jesus was saying, don't do the spiritual equivalent of that ridiculously stupid thing.

Jesus told people, “When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others” ([Matthew 6:2](#)). No one would do anything so obviously self-promoting. Instead, they'd draw attention to themselves by walking slowly and piously, making their

money clearly visible. These self-congratulatory actions, which Jesus characterized as “sounding a trumpet,” undoubtedly produced numerous smiles, smirks, and chuckles.

Can’t you imagine folks looking at each other with amazement and nervous glee when Jesus said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness” ([Matthew 23:27](#))? Jesus was not telling jokes but painting mental pictures with a humorous, satirical sting. Think of the religious leaders’ outrage when Jesus said, “The harlots go into the kingdom of God before you” ([Matthew 21:31, KJV](#)). Then think of the approving smiles of the poor and oppressed in the crowds who finally saw someone unafraid to confront these pseudospiritual false shepherds.

Jesus referred to the shrewd and ruthless political leader Herod as “that fox” ([Luke 13:32](#)). Since a fox is cunning, this may appear to be a compliment, but it certainly wouldn’t have been lost on the crowd that those pointy-eared varmints were nuisances, not terrors. Jesus was poking fun at a vicious, immoral, murderous tyrant by comparing him not to a lion or a bear but to a fox! Imagine people going home and telling their friends, “You won’t believe what Jesus called Herod!”

Jesus said, “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others” ([Matthew 6:16](#)). (“Do not look gloomy” would be a great memory verse for some churchgoers!) The self-righteous religionists of Jesus’ day liked to call attention to their fasting by rubbing ashes on their faces to make them look gaunt and deprived. The more miserable, the more spiritual—or so they supposed. Christ made fun of them for it, and they didn’t like it—but no doubt many of His listeners enjoyed hearing the self-righteous leaders taken to task.

Jesus said of the religious leaders, “They are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit” ([Matthew 15:14](#)). This graphic word picture might have prompted outright laughter. Of course, Jesus wasn’t making fun of the blind; He was critiquing the wealthy, powerful, influential people who prided themselves on their supposed clarity of spiritual vision.

Jesus also used exaggeration for comedic effect. Jesus told the religious leaders they were sightless, missing the whole point of following God: “You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” ([Matthew 23:24](#)). Straining out a gnat would have been hard work for anyone—but impossible for the blind. And what could

be more ridiculous than swallowing a camel? This odd and pithy statement undoubtedly caused laughter to erupt.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* says, “The most characteristic form of Jesus’ humor was the preposterous exaggeration.”^[iii] It’s important to understand that this form of exaggeration is not falsehood in any sense, because the hearer knows it’s overstatement. The speaker is not misleading anyone; rather, He is appealing to the hearer’s humor to make his point.

Consider the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. Jesus depicts a wealthy man who hands over one to five talents to various servants. Five talents would have been the equivalent of nearly a hundred years’ wages.^[iv] In a culture where many people lived hand to mouth, this extreme amount of money would equate to saying, “There was a man who ate one thousand gourds.” The storyteller deliberately paints an absurd picture, with a gleam in his eye, to emphasize his point.

Jesus took hyperbole—a rhetorical art form—to a new level in His story about the king who loaned one of his servants ten thousand talents (see [Matthew 18:23-35](#)), an amount so ludicrous it defied comprehension, since the average person made one talent every twenty years.^[v] Imagine the listeners’ expressions when they tried to calculate the sum that the king forgave his servant.

Then Jesus said another servant owed the forgiven servant one hundred denarii (see [Matthew 18:28](#)). A denarius was a day’s wage, and although a hundred days’ wages was significant, it was the tiniest fraction compared to the forgiven servant’s debt. The parallel to each person’s debt to God, which is beyond measure, must have had a deep impact. It wasn’t stand-up comedy (which might not have been funny to them anyway), but Jesus’ humor certainly would have resonated with His original audience.

Consider when Jesus asked, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye” ([Matthew 7:3, 5](#)). Surely the ridiculous picture of a log sticking out of a man’s eye produced not only a sense of conviction but also broad smiles.



Pittsburgh, PA 15217
412-421-2288

Elton Trueblood recounted how he noticed Christ's humor for the first time. He was reading Matthew 7 aloud when his young son burst into laughter at Jesus' words about a log in the eye. Until then, Trueblood had failed to see Christ's obvious wit.^[vi]

Those who heard Jesus speak knew His keen humor—and they were endeared to Him. The humor of Jesus is far more apparent if we understand His culture and engaging personality. There's nothing disrespectful about noticing that many of Jesus' statements are, by design, happily outrageous.

Randy Alcorn ([@randyalcorn](#)) is the author of over fifty [books](#) and the founder and director of [Eternal Perspective Ministries](#).