Introduction

In 1494, just before the onslaught of the Reformation, Sebastian Brandt, a conservative Roman Catholic scholar living in Basel, looked at the reeking vice and folly of the church of his day and wrote Das Narrenschiff, a Ship of Fools. As the prologue tells us, “One vessel would be far too small / To carry all the fools I know.” Brandt’s veritable floating tub of dolts and sinners heads for an unknown destination, a land of Fools, and functions as a harbinger of an imminent schism. Eulogized as divina satira, divine satire, Ship of Fools catapulted Brandt into the ranks of Dante, at least among the Germans.

While not particularly original, Brandt shrewdly painted a hundred vices of his contemporaries in a sparkling mosaic, sketching bad parents, misers, gluttons, ostentatious church-goers, and even those who are noisy in church. In an English prologue, readers are warned that when one ignores the Bybyll (Bible), then “Banysshed is doctryne, we wander in derknes Throughe all the worlde: our selfe we wyll not knowe.” We know not God, nor virtue, nor even ourselves. A faithful Roman Catholic, Brandt skewered those causing the decay of his beloved church, but he did it with humility, knowing himself to be a shipmate.

Brandt’s floating community of fools personifies the compelling place of laughter and satire in religious life. If satire is to be defined as the ridiculing of human vanity, folly, and hypocrisy, one finds no better metaphor than a boatload of stupid people obliviously drifting toward the edge of the world. To recognize the church as a similar tub of rogues and village idiots is to recognize a fundamental truth about human nature, within or without the Christian community—namely, that none are righteous or wise, but all have fallen into the folly of sin.

Brandt dipped into the prophetic Hebrew tradition of religious satire to showcase the discrepancies between what God’s people were supposed to be and how they actually acted. Using a free and easy style, he translated folly into the vernacular. Brandt published the first “printed
book that treated of contemporaneous events and living persons, instead of old German battles and friend knights.”

It is a product of his own era, even as he lashed out at his own religious tradition, striking at the “dreaded Hydra of popery and monasticism.” His religious satire appealed to people who wanted to read “the history of their own times.”

This book chronicles the evolution of religious satirical discourse from the biblical satire of the Hebrew prophets through the mediated entertainments of modern wits such as Stephen Colbert. It traces the place of such sharp comic discourse in the checkered history of the Christian church, where laughter resides both in the pulpit and in the pews. Mapping the historical cockeyed caravan of eccentric characters and their mocking performances is to find an overarching pattern to the calling of sacred satirist. There are methods to the madness of mockers whose motley garb is often clerical vestments. One finds wild comedy in the carnival festivals of sinners and in the fellowship of saints.

Yet in outlining satiric laughter through history, one also finds remarkable differences. Each age presents its own corruptions, and each age summons forth particular gifts from its religious satirists. The earthy coarse language of Martin Luther and Sir Thomas More during the free-wheeling spirit of the Reformation period contrasts with the enlightened wit of the diminutive Augustan poet Alexander Pope. The religious satirist does not need to be part of the community of faith, as Voltaire and Ambrose Bierce can attest. All they need is an eye and ear for the folly of religious poseurs.

The satirist is a slippery creature. He (usually a he) plays the role of trickster, but with a purpose. When the Apostle Paul listed various gifts of the Spirit to the church at Ephesus, this particular vocation was seemingly absent among the teachers, apostles, evangelists, and even administrators ordained by God for the building up of the church. One category in Paul’s list of gifts and offices did admit the satirist, however, in the figure of the prophet. The prophet’s is an office that tears down in order to build up. Hebrew prophets once assumed the mantle of holy mocking to uproot the brambles in God’s vineyard so that grapes might grow. Within the religious world, the satirist as prophet tries to assume a place among those with more decorous callings. The prophet/satirist points to the second psalm, where the poet notes that “God mocks.”
The Hebrew prophets comprise one root of satire within the Christian community. French sociologist Jacques Ellul wrote that humor was a peculiar way in which ancient Israel adjusted to life in foreign cultures. They “take a word and change a letter to give it a totally new sense. They play on words in such a manner as to ridicule the text or person or to achieve a very different effect.”4 They subverted their own culture, turning the world upside down and finding comedy on the bottom. The playful juxtaposition of words opened up oft-inelegant humor: the prophet Amos compared the elite sophisticated women of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the “cows of Bashan,” that, no matter how sleek and well-fed, were about to be slaughtered (Amos 4:1). His wit exposed the limits of their complacency.5

The reputation of Jewish humorists was so renowned that the Qur’an even denounced them for their puns (or words of ambiguous import)—for “twisting their tongues” and thereby mocking their religion (Surah 2:104, 4:46).6 Jewish suffering gave birth to such wry Yiddish proverbs as “If the rich could hire other people to die for them, the poor could make a wonderful living.” Job would be their poster boy. But their prophets would polish their arts so that their humor pierced like an arrow or stung like a bee.

The prophet does not predict events as much as he speaks forth the judgments of God. He attacks idolatry and adultery with mockery, even with rhetorical railery, called *diasyrmic* in Latin, which means tearing or cutting a man apart. As if to remove a social cancer, satire must cut to heal. At times, sarcastic railing may delight only in the brutal sport of slicing and dicing one’s target.7 Hebrew prophets, however, attacked their targets with this incisive wit and an overpowering sense of spiritual vocation. Literary critic Northrop Frye argued in his *Anatomy of Criticism* that the one essential element of satire is an attack on an object of criticism.8 And prophets practiced this razor-sharp chastisement.

However, the biblical satirist shares in the blame and shame of his defendants. He may be God’s prosecutor, but he is also entwined with the people he ridicules. A true satirist sits in the dock with those who are guilty and identifies as an integral member of the satirized community. The identification of satirist and his target occurs in the trope of a mirror. The mirror offers a comic frame in which to look at and to look through the heart; the satirist finds that none are righteous, including
himself. But he also knows that he is witty, and he takes Shakespeare's words from *King Lear* that “jesters do often prove prophets” and turns them into a mental palindrome, that prophets do often become jesters.

In his classic study of *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin begins with a call for a history of laughter.9 The mysteries of laughter hold deep philosophical meaning for existence, pose challenges to the question of power and being, and offer clues to universal issues of what it means to be human. The sixteenth-century court poet Pierre de Ronsard affirmed that

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\text{God who subjected the world to man,} \\
\text{To man alone permitted laughter} \\
\text{To be merry, not to the beast} \\
\text{Who has neither reason nor spirit.}^{10}
\]

When this divinely bestowed gift of human laughter is connected to religion, it opens up new and risky realms for investigation.

The Hebrew psalter stands as the gateway for the religious satirist—first as a warning, then as a model. How blessed is the man, wrote the poet, who does not walk in the way of the wicked, stand in the path of sinners, or *sit in the seat of scoffers*?\(^{11}\) In a nomadic society, to settle into evil and set up one’s tent among mockers is the final stage of a reprobate pilgrimage. To have only the laughter of cynicism is to pull up one’s chair, sit with the unblessed men (and women), and settle into sarcasm. Against this downward tendency of satire—creating jaded hearts and crooked eyes—there is another seat, that grand and easy chair of Rabelais, where one can sit down with friends and laugh in the good presence of God.\(^{12}\) One can laugh at oneself.\(^{13}\)

The scriptures declare that God disciplines those whom he loves. The question arises as to what might be the means and modes of that discipline. The verbal counterpart to sackcloth, ashes, and a hair shirt might appear in the rhetorical art of satire. The satiric word can lash as brutally as a cat-o’-nine-tails. We find a catalogue of incisive metaphors used in describing satire as a weapon, from lances, thorns, axes, knives, darts, rods, hammers, razors, quills, fangs, venom, and poison, to ordinary stings and slashes. For Protestant reformers, satires were sacred weapons, militantly seen as “scrap metal that the printing press, like a cannon, spews forth.”\(^{14}\) Scholars Edward and Lillian Bloom put forth
another pungent image of satire as a punitive deterrent, describing “a sea gull impaled upon a pier to warn off the other gulls.”15 The warning of satire should awaken a sense of danger.16 It should whip one into shape. The satiric weapon of the Spirit as a two-edged sword pierces the human heart. In afflicting the sinner, satire works as a scourge of God, purifying the soul through a kind of comic mortification.

While the first psalm warns against those who cynically jest, the second psalm sets up the example of God as a satirist, who mocks from heaven. He not only scoffs at the fools that are his creations, but he provides a model for the satirist. Many satirists write out of a sense of moral calling, a vocation to correct what is ill and foolish in their worlds. A biblical satirist like Isaiah uses the same tropes, tools, and tactics to attack his target as the secular social satirist, such as the acidic Roman satirist Juvenal. What differs between them is the object of their wit. Secular satirists take on the corrupt state and the mores of the people. Religious satirists focus upon the people of God, their own community of faith, and its hypocritical leaders. Such satirists have existed since the Hebrew prophets and have evolved throughout history, altering their strategies and emphases as the times have changed themselves. But their message remains the same: my fellow people of God, get right or be obliterated.

Laughter, as sociologist Peter Berger unveils it, is a comic dimension of human experience. But operating in the immoral world of a fallen human nature, satiric laughter dwells on that reality, and secondarily on the hope of redemption. In Rumor of Angels, Berger even marks laughter as a sign of transcendence. Yet, as numerous scholars from Berger to Frye have observed, the origins of satiric laughter is militant, aggressive, and a weapon of attack.17 Laughter must purge before it can redeem.

A study of comic satire necessitates recognition of its heterogeneous evolution; as a multifaceted form, it oscillates or mutates throughout various historical eras. However, the umbrella definition of satire employed in this book distills two recurring characteristics. First, as satire is used to attack, it aims not just to slice and dice, but to correct and reform. I argue that the heart of true satire is recognition of a moral discrepancy between what is proclaimed and what is practiced, often with an attempt to remedy it. It ranges from moral outrage to mischievous exposing of the Emperor’s new clothes. It demonstrates the core
of orthodox Christian thinking that all people know they should live in certain ways—and that no one does. Second, satire employs wit and humor; it entertains. It is not always funny, but it appeals to a recognition of the ridiculous. In this way satire can often be misconstrued or misused. It can dwindle down into sounding like mere mocking and scoffing. But wedding wit to moral concern makes for the most blessed, fertile state of satire.

The changing costumes of religious satirists have fit their times. What might be appropriate attire for the early church fathers would not wear well with Chaucer’s pilgrims. The saucy laughter of the eighteenth-century national poet of Scotland Robert Burns does not translate well into the ironic voices of nineteenth-century Danish author Søren Kierkegaard, but then his sly indirect and ironic communication would not convert easily into the Scottish taverns. Sometimes the religious satirist acts as prophet; sometimes a rooster; sometimes merely an onion lurking in the salads of life. Thus, to follow the paths of the satirist is to encounter the odd and peculiar treasures who are God’s mouthpieces. To retell their tales, parables, and witticisms in the cause of moral and spiritual reform is to look back into universal mirrors that confront us with our own stupid and selfish ways.

The Christian Satirist

The calling to be a Christian satirist still sounds oxymoronic; however, it is rooted in the nature of a God who mocks, exemplified in the practice of Hebrew prophets, and certified in St. Augustine’s concept of Egyptian gold. In defending the Christian’s use of the pagan art of rhetoric, the Bishop of Hippo declared that when the Israelites left Egypt, God gave to them all the gold, silver, cattle, and possessions of their slave masters, primarily because the Egyptians had not used them properly. By extension, while the pagans misused rhetoric, they also discovered some useful precepts “dug up from certain mines of divine Providence, which is everywhere infused, and perversely and injuriously abused in the worship of demons.” These items should not be feared, but “taken from them as from unjust possessors and converted to our use.”

As Augustine commandeered rhetoric from the pagan Greek and Romans, so their principles and practices of wit would contribute to
an evolving art of Christian satire. Satirists would employ techniques of humor and attempt various ploys to tweak the consciences of their targets. Christian satire would flash throughout history with unbridled wit and moral indignation, aiming to correct the corruption and folly of the saints. Its function was to provide a redemptive art that cleansed the infection of the ailing religious body.

The fundamentals of satire, from pagan to Christian, remain the same. From biblical prophets and Roman professionals, to the entertaining celebrities of modern media, these two key elements endure. At its best, Christian satire combines laughter and a vision of reform, in what scholar Ralph Wood once called a comedy of redemption. However, either can exist without the other. Satirical laughter without the hope of correction can devolve into mere sneering and scoffing. A passion to reform without wit can be sheer zealotry or cranky meddling. Traditional satire, from the gentle Roman satirist Horace, his sardonic counterpart Juvenal and the Hebrew prophets, to the mediated satire of Monty Python, is marked by this double pronged presentation: it makes us reconsider our lives stained with hypocrisy and folly, and it makes us laugh.

The Historical Turn

Presenting a historical overview of religious satire is daunting, with all the various literary artifacts, graphic antiques, and archival bits of Western culture involved. A bumpy tour through Rome, Jerusalem, and Lilliput ends up in Comedy Central and, along the way, showcases the various hues of one thread connecting old prophets and new satirists. Each era offers a particular and peculiar contribution to a general portrait of Christian satire. Some characteristics are gained or lost as one traverses history, but such time travel allows one the vantage point of standing on a steeple to inspect the broad countryside and traditions of satire. Yet one should also step down into the pews to experience the juicy moments of satirists showing people their depravity and folly.

The primary aim of this book in exploring the history of satire in religious contexts is to build a model, the Quad of Satire, which identifies four key elements on two axes: moral purpose versus ridicule and humor versus rage. The utility of the Quad is to first help discern true satire with an intention to reform from merely entertaining satire. Sec-
ond, it separates satire from mere derision or ranting. One continuum assesses the moral or religious purpose of the satire, from a positive site of moral reform to the negative extreme of ridicule, which uses sheer scoffing for no redemptive purpose. The second continuum measures the range of the affective nature of the discourse, from anger and rage to a sanguine use of humor.

Renaissance humanist and cleric François Rabelais, practicing a true satire by jesting with moral purpose in his gargantuan novels, finds his place in the upper right (UR) quadrant, where he could poke religious authority with lively, vulgar humor. Hebrew prophet Isaiah, employing the rhetorical art of moral confrontation with less humor and more righteous wit, would reign in the lower right (LR). A mocking Continental like Voltaire would fit smugly in the upper left (UL) section, teetering between redemptive satire and taunting, with a motive more inclined to insult than to reprove and improve (although, I concede, others may interpret him differently). The dark soul of American poet Stephen Crane would inhabit the lower left (LL) realm of rage and ridicule with more of a howling satiric diatribe. Likewise, the far upper left quadrant would include those comedians who simply want to tease and make fun of their subjects. Without a motive for moral or spiritual repair, they fall under the category of an unripe satire, no matter how funny they are. The far lower left quadrant provides an equivalent site for venting and vituperation, joining in our category of unripe satire, no matter how moralistic their screeds are.

A graph of satiric laughter may be laughable, but it helps us to put some variables into focus. Others have set forth a measuring scale or hierarchy of laughter itself. In his diabolical *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis provided four categories, ranging from the heavenly laughter of Joy through the earthly laughter of Fun/Play and continuing through the Joke Proper to the scum-dwelling Flippancy. Satire sits uneasily between the Joke Proper and Flippancy. Another scholar of laughter, James Feibleman, listed an ascending valorized series, from Scorn, Wit, Sarcasm, Satire, Irony, and Humor, to Divine Comedy (which “criticized with love”) and at the apex, Joy. Noticeably, satire fit right in the middle of the pack. This grid recognizes the twin features of satire, namely wit/humor and morality, with the ideal or true satire occurring in the upper right quadrant.
The origins of satire hearken back to both the early Hebrew and Roman eras, when satire was practiced both by those with direct callings as prophets and by those professionals who found that they could not *not* write satire. Either ordained directly by God or provoked by the corruption of their age, they wrote with parables and scathing wit. While both scribbled satire, the Romans claimed the art as their invention. In spite of the Greek comedies of Aristophanes against birds, gods, war, and old, hen-pecked Socrates, that old Roman rhetorician Quintilian made the jingoistic claim, “satura . . . tota nostra est,” alleging that satire was quintessentially Roman. Comic countryman Horace, the leading
lyrical satirist of the first century BCE, wrote personal, gentle satires and odes on wine, friendship and *carpe diem*, celebrating poetry during the golden age of Augustus Caesar. A century later, his cynical counterpart Juvenal argued that it was “impossible not to write satire” when decadence had despoiled Rome. Each Roman subscribed to a particular tone of satire, be it the nimble humor of Horatian satire or the scalding wit of Juvenalian. Across this continuum ran the gamut of witty words uttered in ridicule, rage, and optimistic hope for reform. Horace fits comfortably in the upper right quadrant as his humor was lively and teasing while Juvenal slipped to the border where his angry wit against the lost Republic grew corrosive in his attempts to call attention to moral failings. Yet both inhabit the UR quadrant of ideal satire.

In the mid-eighteenth century, when the Enlightenment had all but won the day, when German philosopher Georg Hegel’s dialectic helped philosophers make tidy sense of contradictory quandaries, and when the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark celebrated christenings with cocktails, a gawky misfit and satiric genius walked the streets of Copenhagen. Søren Kierkegaard took on the ecclesiastical pomposity, bourgeois fatness, and spiritual lethargy of his day. He served not only as a spy for God, but as a moral assassin. He shot his darts at smug, complacent churchgoers as fat geese that had forgotten how to fly. In contrast to a public that wanted no disturbance to their lives, his pseudonymous Johannes Climacus suggested, writing “pen in cheek,” that what “the world, confused simply by too much knowledge, needs is a Socrates.” Irony may lead to true edification; religious satire to genuine reform.

To grasp that religious satire need not always be so ironic, intense, or acerbic, one has only to encounter that great Cockney humorist, G. K. Chesterton. A rotund convert to Roman Catholicism, Chesterton would counteract prevailing trends and jolly the world with paradoxical laughter to make it change.

Both Chesterton and Kierkegaard managed to find spots in the UR quad, where wit wedgs moral purpose. Each practiced his distinctive brand of true satire. While Chesterton lacked the varied voices of Kierkegaard, he possessed a wardrobe of capes and fool’s caps to champion orthodoxy. He could marry serious Christian doctrines with buffoonery, in the same way that the “miracle plays of the Middle Ages would deal with a sacred subject such as the nativity of Christ, yet would combine it
with a farce,” as C. S. Lewis observed. In Chesterton’s playful defense of orthodoxy, he allowed that “if there is one element of farce in what follows, the farce is at my own expense. . . . No reader can accuse me here of trying to make a fool of him; I am the fool of the story, and no rebel shall hurl me from my throne.” If his arguments were a joke, they were a joke against himself. The weapon of the satirist, argued Chesterton, is the “sword of the spirit,” but it is a sword that should be used “with ease; the weapon should be light if the blow be heavy.”

Religious satiric laughter is in need of a history, a story of its odd and quirky practitioners fulfilling a peculiar vocation. For satirists become their own parables. Saints mock and are mocked. At best, they are mirrors exposing our folly. But in order to see the self in a mirror, it is first necessary to get a clear understanding of what such a mirror is and is capable of doing. While the shape and the contours of the looking glass have changed over time, the face that looks back, as artist Hans Holbein’s illustration in Erasmus’s In Praise of Folly shows too clearly, remains the same.

Philosopher of comedy John Morreall argues convincingly for a comic understanding of the human spiritual journey. He observes that humor not only fosters virtues, but “is best seen as itself a virtue.” The various threads of religious humor stretch some three thousand years with hues as variegated, vulgar, and brilliant as their times. The single thread that is satire weaves its way whenever folly reveals tears in the cloth of humanity. And the satirists, whether prophetic or entertaining, whether in the Church or not, would find that the Church needed them, suggesting that they did have a divine and virtuous calling to mock. They sought to imitate a God who mocks.