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On power and prejudice: Islam in French stand-up comedy

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Abstract

What is a Muslim joke? While Jewish humour is a common topic for Western researchers (Davies, 1991), Muslim humour is underexplored in the Western academic field. In France, the media often use the term "Islam" to designate very different realities, not religious as such but a set of clichés about and common cultural representations of Muslims. Using the example of Islam as a topic for French comedians, this paper emphasises how the stand-up setting is suited for making fun of sensitive issues and transform the social conflicts they bear. But it also shows the sometimes-difficult stance that comedians have to take especially when they are part of Muslim minorities. Based on data collected in 2023 and 2024 from the observation of stand-up shows in France and interviews with stand-up comedians with Muslim background, it emphasises that the stand-up format fosters intimacy and enables interaction with the audience, depending on the ability and legitimacy of the joker to "mock the sacred" (Macé, 2007). The French context is especially relevant for understanding the issue of religious conflict in the public sphere and for linking this issue to humour. Humour's potential for both social unity and transgression is here of particular interest (Quemener, 2009, 2013; Kuipers, 2009). Hence, the purpose of the comedian talking about Islam is not only to make the audience laugh, but also to debunk prejudices about being a Muslim or even to address political issues, such as racism (Spielhaus, 2013).

Keywords: stand-up comedy, Muslim humour, sociology, minority, conflict.

1. Introduction

What is Muslim humour and who can use it? Research on the supposed incompatibility between religion and humour has long shown that religions are not impervious to the non-serious (Graham, 2024). In France, the model of *laïcité* that has prevailed since the separation of church and state in 1905 postulates the neutrality of the state in religious matters while guaranteeing freedom of belief and practice. However, French *laïcité* was built in relation to Christianity, and especially Catholicism, which was more powerful at the beginning of the 20th century. The growing visibility of the Muslim population in France from the 1980s onwards has led to new debates, particularly on visible religiosity in the public sphere, and to more

restrictive measures than the 1905 law, which Jean Baubérot describes as "repressive *laïcité*" (Baubérot, 2004). This development is part of a larger movement to categorise Islam as a public concern and thus construct the "Muslim problem" (Hajjat & Mohammed, 2023). This trend has been growing since the 2000s, especially since various terrorist attacks in France and in Europe, but also since the scandal of the *Jyllands* caricatures (Kuipers, 2011). This aggressive form of anti-Muslim *laïcité* has steered the media and politicians, who discuss Islam in an increasingly anxious manner, often linking it to terrorism. In this context, which is hardly conducive to productive dialogue, Muslims living in France have lacked an effective means to oppose such denigrating media and political coverage (Ervine, 2017).

Stand-up comedy offers one possible means of expression, particularly for minority groups, by opening up a way to interact with a hegemonic group (in this instance, French society) (Quemener, 2014). Islam and stand-up comedy therefore offer an intriguing case study given the diversity of representations of Islam and Muslims in France, beyond the strict religious meaning: the everyday religious practice, the difference and the otherness, but also the potential threat due to Islamist terrorism. The aim of this article is to use the example of Islam in France to show how stand-up comedy can take up subjects that are sources of social conflict in order to bring about change. That conflict can be revealed and even embodied in the interactions between the comedian and his or her audience, but it can also be defused or transformed by humour itself. Following Simmel, I define the term "conflict" as an interaction that can both be destructive for the social order, but can also bring about social change and cohesion (Rui, 2010; Simmel, 1995). For example, a comedian may choose to make fun of their own minority group (self-deprecating humour), and potentially stir up conflict, in order to promote anti-racism. The fact that comedians take up Islam as a subject thus raises a number of sociological questions, both about the comedians themselves and their legitimacy in talking about it, but also about their interactions with the audience and the acceptability of what is said about Islam or Muslims. Drawing on this Simmelian definition of conflict, I show how stand-up comedy offers comedians from subaltern groups an ambivalent position of power, while forcing them to position themselves in the artistic field in France. After presenting the theoretical framework, I will contextualise both the specificities of stand-up comedy in France and the ways in which Islam is defined in the French public sphere and in the French stand-up comedy. The article concludes with an analysis of ethnographic material that shows both how the stand-up scene is a space where comedians can take on controversial issues at the risk of reputational loss, and how the power that this stance represents is inextricably linked to an imperative to position oneself in the field of humour.

2. Theoretical framework: how to sociologically deal with humour

Although it has long been considered a minor research topic, humour was tackled by major thinkers of the 20th century, often using a philosophical approach (Bergson, 1900; Bakhtin, 1968, 1984; Berger, 1997; Feltmate, 2013). Over the past fifty years, humour studies have gradually established themselves as an interdisciplinary field of research (Ford et al., 2024). In France, sociology has been increasingly interested in humour in the latest decades, in particular with two theses, by Nelly Quemener (2014) and Laure Flandrin (2021). Using the tools of critical sociology, both of them deconstruct the dominant Bergsonian vision and give meaningful contributions to the analysis of laughter, based on the data they collected in their own fields of research.

Quemener (2014) combines insights from sociology, media studies and cultural analysis to tackle the representation of humour on the French television and its capacity to subvert dominant narratives. Through a thorough examination of televised humour, she highlights its

dual power in building solidarity and shaping representations of identity, but also notices how humour can be ambiguous and reinforce stereotypes, reproducing social hierarchies. Her approach emphasises the interplay between humour and politics, particularly the way humour operates as a form of transgression, that can either challenge or uphold existing power dynamics. By focusing on the cultural and historical specificity of humour in the French context, her work provides a critical insight into the subject. This approach aligns with my own focus on humour as a transgressive and political tool, especially concerning "subaltern groups".

Flandrin (2021) gives a detailed and useful multilevel definition of laughter. First, she considers laughter in an interactional context, taking into account both the person who produces the joke and the person who laughs, as in communication analysis. Second, she defines laughter as a social phenomenon, emphasising its collective dimension – we rarely laugh alone – and the internalisation of social structures that its expression requires – we do not always laugh at a joke because certain socially determined conditions need to be met. Finally, she analyses laughter as a classifying phenomenon: people do not laugh in the same way in all social circles, and we sometimes laugh to distinguish ourselves or to recognise ourselves. In her study, she interviewed around 40 "laughers" (people regularly watching or reading cultural content with a comical dimension) in France with the aim of identifying the sociological factors behind laughter. She developed an analytical framework consisting of three main filters linked to the social dispositions of the interviewees. These three filters determine whether or not laughter occurs when a joke is told. The first filter is based on semiotic analysis and considers laughter as a sign within a communicative analytical schema linked to the biographical experience of the potential laugher, and therefore to his or her socialisation and disposition to laugh. The second filter emphasises the collective dimension of the experience of laughter by situating it within an interaction, as a socialising activity capable of changing the social order. The third filter occurs at a symbolic level, which analyses laughter as a positioning strategy in the field of cultural legitimacy, which takes up elements of the sociology of reception. This analytical framework focuses primarily on reception, although it encompasses the entire communicative process, from the joke to the laugh. For this reason, I will use it to analyse the context of enunciation specific to stand-up comedy, in particular the comedian's posture on stage in relation to an audience that they can only partially distinguish. The interaction at work is very specific in that the comedian is alone on stage in front of an audience made up, at best, of many people whom they do not know or even see.

Through its reactions (such as laughter and applause), the audience expresses its judgment on the quality of the stage performance. I therefore reverse Flandrin's (2021) process: instead of analysing the reception of humour and the reasons why people laugh or do not laugh, I analyse comedians and the conditions in which they work, from the idea of the joke to the audience's response. Considering that comedians are also laughers, I assume that comedians choose jokes that they themselves would laugh at, which makes it possible to apply Flandrin's filters to stand-up comedians. From a theoretical point of view, then, I examine the production of humour, particularly through the creative process of writing and adapting it over time, but also through stage performance and its inherent improvisation, depending on the immediate reaction of the audience, which makes each performance unique.

Flandrin's (2021) and Quemener's (2014) works thus complement each other, supporting my own empirical analysis, since Quemener explores the intentionality of the comedian behind his or her artistic choices, while Flandrin details the sociological and symbolic conditions that determine the success or failure of these choices.

However, if the disciplinary fields mobilised are mainly the sociology of humour and artistic professions, on the one hand, and the sociology of ethnicity, religion and Islam in

particular, on the other, two main elements need to be highlighted in order to carry out this analysis. First, I need to identify which of the many functions of humour are mobilised when the comedian chooses Islam as a subject. Drawing on the work of Kuipers (2009), I will focus on humour as transgression: that is, as an expression of the margins but also as a means of exclusion. In addition, the fact that Muslims are a minority in the stand-up comedy scene gives humour about Islam (and the possibility or otherwise of expressing oneself on the subject as a comedian) a special status. Focusing on Jewish humour, Mintz (1986) proposes a scheme for the appropriation of humour by minority groups based on the premise that humour is necessarily part of a power relationship. In particular, this analysis questions the need for a comedian who is a member of a subordinate group to "reverse the stigma" and make fun of the dominant group once he or she has acquired legitimacy as a comedian, when that same comedian could choose subjects further removed from the power relationship and issues of group identity. The term "identity" is here used in the sense of "commonality" and "groupness", indicating the idea of a shared emotional sense of belonging based on a common attribute (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

Finally, it is important to note that humour towards religion is not always positive and can sometimes be hurtful (Graham, 2024). It is also the case with humour about religions: to the question of the boundaries of humour, my interviewees all answered that they do not want to hurt anyone.

3. How to reveal or induce conflict through stand-up comedy

This theoretical framework provides the basis for a reflection on the potential for conflict inherent in stand-up comedy. There has been no shortage of work on the major media controversies linking Islam and humour, especially since the attacks of 9/11, a pivotal event in the West in many ways. At the time, humour was both a quasi-therapeutic response to the violence of the event and a means of responding to the media's spectacularising approach to the subject (Kuipers, 2005). A few years after 9/11, the Danish cartoons of the Prophet came to international attention, highlighting an unexpected conflict between different visions of modernity: on the one hand, Islam is perceived as antimodern in the Western World and yet defended by the same Western world, which advocates tolerance; on the other hand, the cartoons were sometimes described as primitive and nationalistic, and sometimes supported by defenders of freedom of expression. The reflections initiated by Kuipers question the definition of modernity in the light of these controversies, which have multiplied over the course of the 21st century, through the place given to Islam in the Western world, and particularly in the public sphere (Kuipers, 2011). If the United States is the most common example, France is not far behind, especially if we consider the climax reached in 2015 with the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Bataclan. I will begin by returning to the French case in greater detail, first by outlining the specific nature of stand-up comedy in France, before contextualising its relationship to Islam in the French public sphere.

3.1. Specificity of stand-up comedy in France

In France, the dominant stand-up format is largely inspired by older American models, which began to appear in France in the 2000s. Previously, the comedy scene was dominated by cabarets and *cafés-théâtres*, historically located on the right bank of the Seine in Paris. Today's comedy clubs have continued this trend, with the vast majority located in the northern half of the capital (Le spot du rire, 2025). Before the arrival of stand-up from the USA, the French tradition of stage humour involved the construction of fully written stories with a single comedian playing numerous characters in dialogue, using gestures and changes of

voice, accents, attitudes, costumes and so on. The abundance of voices and actions often makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify the real person behind all these fictional characters (Quemener, 2014).

From the 2000s onwards, stand-up comedy overturns the French tradition, simplifying the use of the stage as much as possible. Costumes and fiction have gradually been abandoned to make way for a much more intimate and minimalist format that encourages comedians to reveal themselves. The abandonment of fictional characters, at least in appearance, gives the audience a façade of authenticity, even if there is no proof that the comedian is actually being authentic on stage. Such shows often mix fiction and reality, even if the "I" is derived from the real person of the comedian. Although the comedian can create a fictional "I" and completely fabricate or mix the true with the false, the requirement is to appear authentic. Stand-up therefore draws on real-life experiences and pathos to help the audience identify with the comedian. Though their anecdotes are often based on their own experiences, it is not uncommon for comedians to adapt an anecdote from someone else's life for example, in order to make the routine funnier while preserving the authenticity of their storytelling. In France, a turning point came in 2006 with the opening of the Jamel Comedy Club, a French show based on the American model, followed in 2008 by the opening of the Comedy Club, the base of Jamel Debbouze's troupe, and the Paname Art Café, now one of the biggest comedy clubs in Paris. Today, there are dozens of comedy clubs in Paris, and they open and close so frequently that it is difficult to estimate their number.

The creation of venues dedicated to stand-up comedy in Paris launched a new generation of French comedians. The stand-up format, with the comedian at its centre, allows for a much more intimate expression on stage, beyond the realm of fiction, and makes space for a narrative of the self. Comedians talk about their lives, their identities and how they construct them. The emphasis on authenticity also makes the stage more accessible, and Jamel Debbouze has served as an example to a new generation of immigrants' children, especially Arabs, to try their luck (Quemener, 2013).

Stand-up is diversifying and contributing to a new awareness of the migrant experience shared by comedians from migrant backgrounds. But that should not hide the economic challenges of a career in stand-up comedy: no training is required, and all the courses directly related to stand-up comedy are often unaffordable for people without supplementary work. The fact that many small comedy clubs operate using a pay-what-you-want system, with the audience only offering cash at the end of the show, makes it difficult for comedians to have these gigs registered. Indeed, the French system requires for comedians a high number of official gigs every year, so that they qualify for a specific social status, which provides public support to artists. Most comedy clubs do not give the comedians a paycheck, some of them have an "in and off" system, which means that the "off-gigs" are not paid. All this contributes to keeping the pool of comedians in a precarious situation.

One of the key features of stand-up is the systematic attempt to break the fourth wall. On the French stage today, there are no longer characters talking to each other, only a comedian addressing the audience. Interaction is therefore at the heart of stand-up comedy, and not simply because the audience laughs. This fact provides important insight into the relationship between ethnoracial minorities, both in the comedy world and more widely in the public arena in France. Nelly Quemener has analysed the "self-narrative" nature of stand-up comedy, which places it partly outside the realm of fiction and sometimes very directly intertwines issues of race, gender and social class. She has shown how humour can be used to mock the social order and the distribution of power, and even to change them. Humour is thus a means of playing with the margins through notions of difference and modulation in their acceptance, along a spectrum that ranges from acceptance to rejection to indifference. The definition she gives of stand-up comedy is taken from the work of Schulman and has the merit of taking into

account issues of domination, such as gender and race, as well as social class: "The stand-up comedy tradition, which originated in the US among racial minorities, is an accomplished form of self-narrative and everyday sketches that plays on types and stereotypes of race, gender and class, and confronts different modes of categorisation" (Quemener, 2013, p. 9). I employ this definition in the present essay.

3.2. The case of Islam in French stand-up comedy

Shoaib (2019) describes the two possible configurations of Muslim humour in the Western countries: either the comedian is of Muslim origin and talks about a wide variety of subjects, but not necessarily about Islam, or the comedian is categorised as a "Muslim comedian" and focuses his or her sketches mainly on Islam, the difficulty of performing in a Western country, the fear of Muslims and the prejudices that go with it, and the many stereotypes associated with Muslims in Europe. This breakdown may vary from country to country, but also according to the comedian's country of origin and the immigrant generation to which he or she belongs. Other parameters, such as the comedian's relationship with religion, social background or level of fame might also impact the comedian, however.

In France, it is not so easy to talk about "Muslim humour" because religion is not something that is easily discussed in public. The separation of the Catholic Church and the state in 1905 led to the establishment of France's own model of *laïcité*, which makes religion a private matter that has no place in the public arena. As a result, religion is still considered a sensitive issue, and this is even truer for Islam. The lack of official statistics makes it impossible to know the exact figures for religious affiliation, but the *Trajectoires et Origines* survey provides an estimate for 2019-2020. For example, 10% of respondents in France identified themselves as Muslims, among which around 20% considered themselves to be practising Muslims (TeO2, Insee, 2020). But beyond these "everyday Muslims", whose religious practice and everyday life can serve as material for Muslim comedians, Islam is primarily viewed through the notorious "Muslim problem", which refers to the alleged incompatibility of Islam with the values of the French Republic. This notion is widely propagated by the media and politicians, who frequently associate Muslims in France with challenges such as the integration difficulties faced by children from migrant families of former French colonies – particularly in terms of employment and education – but also with terrorist attacks. These associations have popularised the term "*communautarisme"* in the French media. Although this term literally means "forming a community", it is predominantly used in political debates and media discourses to pejoratively qualify a perceived refusal to integrate into the host country, instead remaining confined within one's own community, likened to a ghetto. Such communities are often depicted as a threat to French identity and the universalist model of the Republic. In the case of Islam, the specific dynamics of the French post-colonial context amplify the visibility of this religion. With the rise of terrorism, the integration debate has increasingly shifted toward a security-centred narrative, further fuelling distrust of Islam as a visible religion, particularly through symbols like the headscarf. This evolution is also influenced by factors such as a strain of French anti-Americanism, which views multiculturalism as a threat to the French universalist model (Dufoix, 2016) and the growing reliance on individual testimonies and anecdotes rather than social science analyses in understanding social realities (Beaugé & Hajjat, 2014). Together, these dynamics have contributed to constructing the "Muslim problem" (Beaugé & Hajjat, 2014). It is therefore difficult to go beyond the dominant media discourse, to break through the monolithic façade of these categories and to grasp the diversity covered by the term "Muslims in France".

The risk is to essentialise the minority as a homogenous group, especially in a capitalist context. Bernard Lahire describes the risk of "a society which sanctifies the individual to make

him responsible for all his misfortunes" (Lahire, 2013). The impression of individual inability is first due to capitalism and neoliberalism and cannot be neglected. This phenomenon is reminiscent of the definition of the word "ethnoracial" given by Macé (2007): "the articulation of processes of ethnicisation and racialisation by which certain actors and social groups can be reduced to a cultural origin and/or physical traits." Even if "ethnoracial" is not specific to Islam, it also applies in this specific case.

In a way, stand-up comedy has a role to play. Like a magnifying glass, humour can exaggerate the features of the supposed incompatibility between Islam and Western norms to elicit laughter. As Göle (2015, p. 9) suggests,

> What poses a problem is not an antagonism between the values of French society, between those who share them and the 'others', between those who have a sense of humour and those who lack it. The problem is that the voices of a fringe of society, those of ordinary Muslims, their presence, their points of view, their sense of humour, all remain inaudible.

The problem with this definition is that it treats Muslims as mute and therefore as a totally subordinate minority, with no possibility of escape. Better is the position adopted by Le Blanc (in a discussion in Paugam, Le Blanc & Rui, 2011, p. 6), whose work on people in precarious situations proposes a paradigm shift:

> It would be wrong to see the precarious, and also the excluded, only as a being 'without', devoid of any capacity for action or narrative. To analyse the precarious exclusively as the 'voiceless' or the 'invisible' is to risk reiterating the hegemonic frameworks of apprehension and recognition within which lives are recognised as fully human. In reality, the voiceless are voiceless only insofar as their voice is not heard, and this lack of hearing helps to define social insecurity: the insecure are precisely those whose voice is no longer heard, cannot count for others and is considered an inaudible voice.

Instead of seeing people in precarious situations as voiceless (they do have a voice), he notes that these voices are not listened to. The question can easily be transposed to ethnoracial minorities and especially to the case of Muslim comedians: by virtue of their profession (or hobby, for some), the microphone offers an opportunity to have a voice. But how do they find an audience that will listen to them? Quemener emphasises the difference between a dominated group and a subaltern group, in the sense that the latter is in a position of resistance to the hegemonic group (Quemener, 2014, p. 11). From this point of view, stand-up comedy could provide a space of empowerment for Muslims and, more broadly, for ethnoracial minorities. Even in the French stand-up comedy, humour can be accused of being "communautarist". According to Alain Vaillant (2021, p. 57), community humour is sometimes considered problematic when linked to immigration. In France, this phenomenon is negatively perceived as a consequence of globalisation and of the cultural influence of the USA .

Ervine (2019) draws a comparison between two Muslim comedy shows, "Allah made me funny", by a trio of American comedians, and "à part ça tout va bien" ("apart from that everything is fine"), created by a French duo. Both shows had the same original intention: to reach a non-Muslim audience in order to dismantle Western prejudices about Islam. But while the American trio enjoyed national and international success, the French duo remained on the fringes, never really breaking through in France. One hypothesis put forward by the author is that French media will not question their point of view towards Muslims, based on the prejudice that Islam cannot be funny and that the French audience was not ready for this type of humour. Ervine quotes one of the comedians, speaking of a "distinctively French characteristic" (Ervine, 2019, p. 146). More generally, the French context is not very conducive to the cultural and media visibility of Islam outside of the aforementioned "Muslim

problem". Deconstructing stereotypes is a first step towards cultural affirmation, and thus the possibility of greater visibility. However, current media coverage in France is not favourable to this development.

Based on this analytic framework, drawn from various fields of research, my aim is to analyse the extent to which comedians in France use their art to take up a conflictual theme such as Islam, to reveal it or even to change it. Going back to Simmel's (1995) definition of conflict, the existence of tension between two parties is inherent to conflict, but it arises from interaction and therefore from dialogue. The interaction goes in only one direction: that of the media, which exposes the "Muslim problem" without giving Muslims living in France the room to respond. However, the stand-up stage can provide a space where this interaction is reciprocal and that enriches the current tension. Through representation, the interaction between the comedian and his or her audience becomes a vehicle for the conflict between Muslims, represented by the comedian, and the French media or public opinion, as embodied by the audience.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Methodology

Data collection took place in Paris and in Strasbourg. Ethnographic observation took place intermittently in Strasbourg between January 2023 and March 2024, and more intensively in Paris in April and May 2024. Strasbourg has a few stand-up stages to offer, like most French towns, whereas Paris is one of the European cities with the highest number of stand-up venues (more than 130). Because of the difference between the two, I felt it was necessary to have points of comparison to put the social reality observed in Paris into perspective, using more modest local comparisons but with a similar development dynamic, only later. There are many differences, particularly in terms of career prospects and minority representation among comedians. But mobility should not be overlooked, and it is interesting to see that comedy clubs are above all places of passage, and that comedians build their careers through mobility and movement.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in the two cities with comedians who talk about Islam on stage. I chose them either because I had attended their performances and heard their jokes on stage, or because other respondents gave me their contact details, telling me that Islam was present in their topics on stage or in their personal lives. The comedians were contacted via Instagram, the main medium for promoting stand-up humour, and the interviews took place either in cafes or over video calls. I systematically mentioned Islam in setting up the meeting, which means that in the majority of the interviews, the interviewees brought up the subject on their own, without me having to ask. The interviewees did not always say that they were Muslims or practising Muslims, but they always had a connection to Islam, even if they did not have religious beliefs or practices. The average length of the interviews was 90 minutes and the questions asked concerned mostly the professionalisation of comedians, their level of political engagement and the place they give to religion on stage. Of the 15 interviewees (three women and 12 men), eight described themselves as practising Muslims and two as "more or less" practising Muslims. There are only three women, because stand-up comedy remains a very male-dominated world. 12 of the interviewees came from a Muslim family, among them two women. However, only one respondent said that he had directly introduced himself as a Muslim on stage. Faced with this question, some felt that this information was so obvious that there was no need to mention it openly. Others talk about their Muslim family and let the audience work it out for themselves. Finally, some think that it

is irrelevant. More radically, two comedians (a man and a woman) refused to be interviewed, one explaining that as a comedian he did not want to be associated with Islam, the other without justification. It was therefore normal for the former to talk about his country of origin, systemic racism in France, and therefore to make frequent references to his immigrant background on stage, but this had to remain separate from any link to Islam. Although the comedian did not give a clear reason for his refusal, it raises a number of questions, particularly about the acceptability of what is said on stage. The role of social networks is crucial here, as a humorous slip-up in front of 30 people in a comedy club does not have the same impact on a comedian's reputation as the same thing in a reel with thousands of views on Instagram. The existence of social networks therefore largely limits the right to make mistakes and encourages many comedians to be vigilant about what they post online, but also about what they say on stage. The question of offending minorities is at the heart of this reflection: do you have to be a Muslim to make jokes about Muslims or Islam (Shoaib, 2019)? The following examples show that dealing with conflictual issues on stage is a double-edged sword that forces comedians with a Muslim background to position themselves in the field of humour.

4.2. The stage as a room for interaction but also for statement and positioning

Stand-up comedians usually introduce themselves at the beginning of their routine. As a French comedian stated: "It is traditional in stand-up comedy to give your first name, surname and pedigree". This American-style introduction highlights some of the peculiarities of the stand-up scene. The term "pedigree", usually reserved for animal lineage, is of course a joke and a way of being provocative and making fun of the habit of comedians introducing themselves by stating their religious affiliation or ethnoracial background as a manner of showing authenticity, either to set up a joke about it or to play with the audience's potential expectations when the person on stage is not white. Yassine Daoudi (2023) provides a striking example in his sketch "*Musulmans à temps partiel*" ("Part-time Muslims"), available online: "So, my name is Yassine Daoudi, I'm a Muslim, and I'm telling you this because...". The reason for this is that his whole sketch is about Muslims, so he chooses from the outset to present himself as a Muslim and to position himself in relation to the subject he is addressing. In this way, he shows that his jokes are self-deprecating rather than a form of external mockery, which gives him more leeway and legitimacy. When the comedian is not white, but does not necessarily want to centre their ethnoracial or religious identity in their routine, they may either avoid mentioning it or play with the audience's possible assumptions. In France, some very well-known comedians of Muslim background take the microphone to play several games without ever clearly stating their possible religious affiliation or by keeping their religion or their family's country of origin vague. What matters is in the eyes of the audience, not necessarily in the actual situation of the comedian. This is linked to the second filter defined by Flandrin (2021): the interaction between the comedian and the audience is possible when the comedian anticipates what the audience expects from him or her and accompanies the public toward a common direction.

The comedian can therefore choose to be transparent or play with the truth, which can give him or her a degree of mystery in the eyes of the audience, but also a form of freedom. For comedians with Muslim background, this opens up the space to play with the audience's doubt and to joke about Islam on stage, even if the audience is uncertain whether the comedian is in fact connected in some way to Islam. During an interview, a Muslim comedian in Paris shared with me his thoughts on whether or not to identify as a Muslim on stage:

> One of the things that struck me when I first got into stand-up was that I thought, this is crazy... there are only Arabs, there are lots of Blacks, but... I don't think there are any Muslims. I really

> felt like I was the only one. So, I was a bit in detection mode: is he in the team, or is he not? I don't know, because he looks like an Arab, he says "Salam" to me when we arrive, like you could say to anyone, then you get on stage and there are jokes and you think "ah no, maybe he's not a Muslim" and... in fact you don't know. So, after that, we were really into the whole "let's go incognito" thing, you know, a bit like I've always done in the corporate world in France. You don't necessarily have to flaunt it, but I think there's no problem in saying it. (Translated by the author)

This excerpt highlights the questions that can be raised by comedians themselves. This comedian wonders how relevant it could be for him to present himself as a Muslim on stage. The information could have an impact on his reputation in a way he cannot control. For instance, being associated with a religion or a community can lead to a stigma, which would make him officially "The Muslim comedian". The consequences would be a shift in the expectations of the audience: if labelled a Muslim comedian, then he implicitly must joke about this topic often, at the risk of losing a part of his audience or of losing the possibility of diversifying the topics he wants to deal with on stage. Because the label "Muslim" shapes not only the jokes the comedian must tell but also the representations and expectations of the audience, that makes such a statement decisive for the future of the comedian and the audience he targets.

What is more, the emphasised differences between Arabs, Blacks and Muslims in this excerpt raise the issue of religion and culture on stage. Religious and ethnoracial categorisations are used by many comedians on and off stage, which questions their validity. This shows how porous the categories are and how often the categories of "Muslims" and "Arabs" are simply conflated, especially in France, where the majority of Muslims are from North Africa (70% in 2008, according to the *Trajectoires et Origines 2* [Trajectories and Origins] survey, Insee, 2020), so considered Arabs. The reverse is also true, with 64% of the descendants of immigrants from the Maghreb identifying as Muslims in 2019 (*TeO2, Insee,* 2020, Simon 2019). It is therefore difficult to differentiate both categories and to define what each of them means, not only from an academic viewpoint but also in the eyes of the interviewees.

In short, positioning oneself as part of a subaltern group is not an easy decision for a comedian. This questions the legitimacy of who can use these categories and discuss certain topics. In the previous extract, the comedian is a Muslim Arab, but his comments would read very differently if he were white for example, especially on stage. Joking about ethnoracial categorisations on or off stage means playing on the edge, at the risk of crossing a boundary (Quemener, 2014). That is why stating one's ethnoracial and/or religious affiliation on stage is not such an obvious strategy; sometimes it is easier to play with the audience's uncertainty and unstated questions. This strategy does not mean that the comedian is refusing to position themselves, because it is a positioning in itself: they are choosing *not* to be associated with a minority and choosing to remain a member of the hegemonic group.

Moreover, transparency about one's religion can lead to unpleasant situations for comedians. For instance, an interviewee explained to me the delicate position he has in stand-up comedy, which has attracted criticism from all sides. On the one hand, he acknowledges that Islam plays an important role in his shows and he is open about it on stage, but he has long been accused even by other comedians of being a "*communautaire"* comedian "doing Arab humour for Arabs". However, he chooses to have few barriers in the subjects he tackles, and does not hesitate to talk about his sex life on stage. Bringing these two subjects together in the same show is a way of reconciling several aspects of his life through humour, but it also creates a contradiction in the image he portrays and in the eyes of the audience. In this way, he is sometimes categorised as a "*communautaire"*, but he is also criticised by pious Muslims who are shocked by his honesty on certain subjects. But this apparently uncomfortable

position also gives him power, because his audience is diverse, so he can reach a wide audience with his humour and pass on his ideas at the same time. Indeed, as his shows went on, he realised that there were more and more white French people in his audience and he played on this observation:

> By the way, it's funny, I have a joke that I always tell at the start of the show, and there's always someone white in the audience, so I tell them "Yeah, you're between two Arabs, but don't be afraid, my Arabs are Arabs with permanent job contracts, who are ambitious, who are buying flats, they're not the ones you see on *CNews* [French far-right TV Channel], it's different", they're like, you see, they're discovering that there's plurality even within a community. (Translated by the author)

In this quote, the comedian does not hesitate to overplay the stereotype of the "good Arab", the one who is well regarded in France, and who is not so far removed from the portrait of the "good Muslim", i.e. the one who would be compatible with the values of the Republic. In this way, he defuses any tensions around cultural differences and brings his audience together. To use the same categories he does, on the one hand, the "Arabs" present are validated in their social success, that is often invisible, while on the other, "white people" are invited to review any prejudices they may have. From an a priori "*communautaire"* content, he manages to speak to his entire audience and shake up the established norms: the "white people" are no longer in a position of domination, and power relationships are reversed. This mechanism is made all the simpler by the fact that, in most shows, the audience is already familiar with the identity of the comedian and his or her type of humour. The audience's dispositions are therefore compatible with those of the actor, which guarantees laughter, as in the first of Flandrin's filters (Flandrin, 2021). Moreover, it is because he is aware of this resemblance with his audience that he takes the liberty of exaggerating the stereotype: by portraying an Arab with a stable job, who wants to invest in real estate and who is economically successful, he is above all talking about himself, and is therefore unassailable. Performing this duality of being subject and commentator at the same time allows him to transcend boundaries and differences through humour. Without aiming at doing political humour, he manages to dismantle preconceived notions and shift power dynamics, turning a vulnerable position into a space for empowerment and collective laughter. However, the conditions are not always right for the laughter to take place and for power to be temporarily overthrown.

4.3. The microphone: a double-edged sword for the comedian

Holding a microphone in the limelight gives the comedian much power over a whole crowd in the darkness. While the comedian's task is most often to find points of anchorage with the audience, either through identification or sympathy; sometimes, deliberately or not, the comedian drives a wedge between themselves and the audience. The comedian's main duty is to make the audience laugh, but this contract can come into conflict with the power they have on stage. This is often the case, for example, when a comedian oversteps boundaries and shocks the audience, but less often the opposite can happen, when the audience's interventions make the comedian uncomfortable.

A 27-year-old Muslim comedian told me about an unpleasant experience she had when faced with an audience member who refused to cooperate. She explained to me that she avoids talking about sex on stage because the subject does not make her very comfortable and, in her words, out of consideration for her family or other members of her community who might be in the audience and whom she does not wish to shock. Nevertheless, during a stand-up evening, an audience member made some rude remarks to her and she rebuked him, a little

defensively. He insisted, and she finally pointed out that he was embarrassing everyone and that she would like to return to her routine. She thus found herself torn between her duty to be funny and to meet the audience's expectations with humour, and the embarrassment she felt, which had consequences on her ability to react instantly:

> Very quickly, because in fact I said earlier that I was on my period, so if I throw my mic in his face, well then, I'll be on my period! They're going to think I'm being hysterical, so I can't do it. So, you have to try and bounce back calmly. (Translated by the author)

This situation depicts a difficulty that can arise in balancing the expectations of the audience and the routine she is trying to produce, with the added pressure of knowing that there may be other Muslims in the audience. She is as a result careful not to offend them, but also careful about the image she projects to them as a Muslim, particularly a Muslim woman, even if she doesn't necessarily present herself as such on stage:

> I often have to... patch things up like that, but I only do it when I know it won't harm me in my community afterwards. That night, there was no one from my community, so I could. If there was someone from my community... I wouldn't have even brought it up, you know... (…) I can convey certain messages, but because of my religion I'm obliged to be careful about what I convey as an image, that I don't authorise things that are illicit in my religion, because I'm no one to question what God says or things like that, you see. (…) Who's there also plays a big part. If I see a lot of veiled women in the room, I'm going to avoid being too vulgar. You see, because I know that there are subjects where for them... They wouldn't want me to dirty their ears with words like that, or because they didn't come to hear things like that. (Translated by the author)

The possibility of noticing who is in the audience does not play such a big role for other comedians I interviewed. In this particular case, it is relevant, because it raises for her some crucial issues for her future career. Even if she has the legitimacy to make people laugh because she holds the microphone, she must maintain her credibility in front of the audience and take responsibility for her choices of routines. This leads her to question her ability to stay true to herself as a comedian and at ease with her beliefs and values, while being on stage and dependent on the audience's reaction. Even if she wants to make the audience laugh, she is not ready to cross some boundaries because a part of the audience wants it, but she does not, and if there are Muslims in the audience, they also may not want it.

In light of these facts, one cannot overlook the intersection of gender and religious affiliation in this uneasy interaction (Mazouz & Lépinard, 2021). The negative interaction she describes was sexist because the spectator's remark referred to her gender, which sexualised her on stage. Apart from her desire to avoid talking about sex on stage as a Muslim woman, she was also uncomfortable being a woman on stage, as evidenced by her reaction. She considered her mention of having her period and realised that an aggressive reaction would only fuel sexist comments, potentially categorising her as "hysterical". The choice of term is not insignificant, since "hysterical" is an adjective widely used in sexist discourse. So, she opted for caution and changed the subject as quickly as possible. On the other hand, this female comedian's reservedness and caution reflect a less dominant occupation of space than that of a man. The other male comedians did not express as much caution or self-doubt when approaching the audience - not to mention the fact that they are proportionally less subject to sexualising remarks from the public.

More broadly, however, this is also an issue for any comedian trying to reach an audience: do they want to please everyone and are they afraid to be shocking? In the case of Islam in France, the issue of conflict can arise in both directions, depending on who's concerned between the comedian and the audience, and who's willing to cross moral or religious boundaries. The power position of the comedian is afforded by the microphone but does not

necessarily last, depending on how they use it and on their interaction with the audience. To come back to the issue of being a Muslim in France, one might ask whether presenting oneself as a Muslim on stage can lead to justification. For the comedian, it is a crucial moment of positioning, which may consist of proving that he or she is part of the "good Muslims", on the side of the French Republic. In reality, this is done in a subtle way, by making a mockery of republican *laïcité*. While mocking republican clichés about Islam, the Muslim comedian proves by his or her very presence on stage and his or her ability to make a diverse audience laugh that Islam's incompatibility with the values of the Republic is a prejudice.

The role of social media should also be highlighted here. In this manner, comedians can reach a wider audience, and also target people who would pay for the whole show (either online or in the theatre). Nevertheless, there is a big difference between online videos and what happens on stage, where there is room for improvisation, adaptation and refinement. For the comedian, the awareness of what happens in front of twenty people in a small and sometimes unknown comedy club is not the same as what could be watched online thousands of times and stay forever as a milestone for the comedian's career (in a good or a bad way). Context, therefore, also plays a large role in addressing a conflictual issue on stage. But if a comedian has to walk the thin line between being nice and shocking people, it is also because there are issues of positioning on stage, coming from their interaction with the audience and from the competition they face in order to survive in the humour field.

5. Conclusion

These different examples encompass the scope of Simmel's (1995) definition of conflict as a potentially constructive form of social interaction. Rather than disrupting the social order, conflictual topics become in the context of stand-up a source of interaction, critical reflection and transformation. Stand-up comedy is built around the interaction between a comedian and an audience, which is a fertile ground for tackling sensitive subjects such as Islam in France, while questioning social relations and stereotypes. However, this space is far from being neutral, and the success of the performance revolves around some conditions – not far from the filters defined by Flandrin (2021).

First, the stand-up comedian is in a position of power. But in the French context, choosing Islam as a subject for stand-up comedy is a bold gamble. By tackling this politically and socially charged subject, comedians are trying to make people laugh about a divisive issue. For stand-up comedians, whatever their relationship with Islam, it is risky because they do not know the dispositions of their audience, which can alter the laughter. Some of them project stereotypes or prejudices onto the subject, while others may perceive a representation of a marginalised condition or even a stigmatisation of their belonging.

Despite the considerable power that comedians have over their audience, materialised by the microphone, this remains fragile and must be constantly reaffirmed. The comedian has to convince the audience of his or her legitimacy to deal with the subject, and of his or her ability to generate laughter from it. When the female comedian I interviewed changes the subject because of the sexist remark she received, it is a way to reclaim her power as a comedian. The comedians' position of power is therefore ambivalent (Quemener, 2013): On the one hand, it gives them full agency and scope, the possibility to have a voice and visibility, to represent a group and to gain a certain freedom of expression and a scope to play with the existing categories. On the other hand, this position of power can be their undoing. Without going to the extreme of losing their entire reputation, comedians are never safe from "bombing" or public embarrassment, from misunderstandings and fuelling tensions, especially if the content

is perceived as transgressing certain moral or social limits. This can jeopardise their precarious position of power as well as the quality of their interaction with the audience.

The case of Muslim comedians highlights specific dilemmas relating to representation and identification. The decision to talk about Islam on stage, and more generally about subaltern groups, and to play with the audience's implicit expectations reflects a complex strategy of interaction. On stage, comedians face a double social injunction: to be authentic and true to the identity they present, while at the same time being funny, accessible and relatable. If the comedian fails to gain the audience's empathy or identification by being different, for instance, by refusing to play the "good Muslim" or the "good Arab", he or she can build his or her reputation as a comedian around that difference. The French comedian Mustapha El Atrassi chose this path and self-produced several shows, among which one named "*Communautarisme*" just to make fun of the notion. Such a choice implies a renunciation of universality in favour of group specificity. In his case, it worked. But this choice is more complex than the simple dichotomy between universalism and particularism, since the desire for the widest possible audience is not incompatible with addressing subaltern communities or groups without hurting their feelings. The choice made by some comedians to blur the boundaries between their personal identity and the expectations of their audience also highlights the porous nature of social categories and the difficulty of breaking out of predefined frameworks, particularly in a French context where the categories of "Muslim" and "Arab" are often confused.

The stakes are even higher for female artists, as they must navigate a complex web of audience expectations that intertwine issues of gender, race, and cultural identity. Unlike their male counterparts, female comedians often face heightened scrutiny regarding their appearance, behaviour, and the topics they choose to address. This scrutiny is further compounded for women of colour, particularly those of Muslim or Arab descent in the French context, as they are often subjected to overlapping stereotypes and prejudices. The example presented explains how delicate the balance is for them to find between personal authenticity and audience expectations, and sometimes it just doesn't work.

More broadly, the issue of Islam is often subsumed under that of ethnoracial identity, which is very present in French stand-up comedy, first because of the strong representation of comedians from Turkish or Arab families, and also because of the model imported from the United States. This calls into question the use of terms and categories by the public and by comedians, but also questions the categories themselves: For instance, where does the category of Muslim comedian come from?

In conclusion, stand-up comedy provides a relevant space for comedians to address conflicting issues and attempt to subvert power relations by playing with expectations and stereotypes. The example of Islam in France, dealt with through the prism of stand-up comedy, illustrates how humour can transform a sensitive subject into a lighter dialogue, without direct stigmatisation. The comedian is both subversive and constrained, navigating the tightrope between laughter, representation and responsibility.

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