

## Book review

**Lindvall, Terry (2015) *God Mocks: A History of Religious Satire from the Hebrew Prophets to Stephen Colbert*. New York: New York University Press.**

Although now five years old, *God Mocks*, Terry Lindvall's book on religious satire, is very topical, focusing on a hot issue: the intersections of two powerful forces: religion and humour. This is a topic that usually surfaces in conflictual terms (for example, in terms of blasphemy) when humour and religion clash in often violent terms. Lindvall's book is historical and thus casts a much wider net.

In this book, Lindvall hones his scholarly expertise to the genre of religious satire paying particular attention to the moral and virtuous aspects (or lack thereof) of religious satire. His approach combines historical and literary analysis. He offers the reader a historical overview of Judeo-Christian religious satire, which he admits is a rather "daunting" task (p. 7) since he seeks to cover the history of religious satire across three millennia. His overview begins with Biblical humour in the Hebrew scriptures, comedy and satire in the ancient Greek and Roman periods, and satire in the New Testament and early Christianity; it proceeds to medieval, Catholic and Protestant satire during the Reformation and the works of American and British satirists in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and takes us all the way to the TV and other comics of the present in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yet Lindvall's book is much more than a historical overview. He explores the history of religious satire through the lens of an analytical model which he calls "the Quad of Satire". It consists of four criteria or poles along two axes: a horizontal axis of moral purpose versus ridicule, and a vertical axis of humour versus rage. The author uses this model consistently in his historical review and evaluation of religious satire in 10 chapters, each one corresponding to a historical period.

The book begins with a short Introduction where Lindvall explains the rationale of his approach and analytical model. He proceeds in each chapter with an overview and mapping of selected religious satire and satirists in each of the historical periods of his mapping, including, for example, the Hebrew prophets, Horace, the Christian Gospels, Jerome, Rabelais, Chaucer, Boccaccio, Erasmus, Martin Luther, Burns, Voltaire, Moliere, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Twain, Franklin, Chesterton, Waugh, Monty Python, and Stephen Colbert.

In each period and chapter, Lindvall evaluates religious satire according to two pairs of criteria: moral purpose-ridicule and humour-rage. Every chapter flows well and is linked to the other by ending with a paragraph that connects and leads elegantly to the next chapter. His language and prose are both eloquent and witty. This is visible in some of his humorous chapter headings and sub-headings such as: "Smart ass" (p. 15), "Caesar salad satirists" (p. 20), and "Reformed farts" (p. 86). The book also offers rich visual material consisting of 26 colour illustrations of religious satire. Lindvall ends his book with a Conclusion of seven observations on the nature and function of religious satire. Most notably, in his first point, the author argues that true satire requires both wit and moral purpose.

Some scholars may question Lindvall's approach of evaluating and measuring religious satire according to the righteous rule of moral purpose and his implicit favouring of "true satire"

(as opposed to a false one?). His evaluative approach may seem contradictory to the very essence and transgressive nature of humour, including satire. Yet it seems that the *raison d'être* of satire, which relies on irony and allusion, and is sharp in tone, has a morally corrective aspect and is precisely intended to speak truth to power, for example, especially in matters of religion and politics.

Including in his historical overview references to religious satire beyond the Judeo-Christian world, for example, to the Islamic world and especially to the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, both of which have incorporated a healthy dose of humour, would have broadened the book's perspective, adding an interesting comparative dimension. It would also have been useful to the scholars of humour studies, cultural studies, religious studies, and literature, who will be reading this book, if the index at the end of the book included not only authors, but also a keyword/subject index.

All this does not take away from the fact that Lindvall's historical analysis offers an in-depth treatment of religious satire, thus making a significant contribution to the dearth of scholarly sources in the field of humour and religion.

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