

# Contemporary political satirists: unlikely prophets?

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## Abstract

*The conventional understanding of the church's prophetic witness is that it is founded on the prophets portrayed in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. They communicated God's message in relation to various issues such as religious practices and loyalty to God, but also, importantly, criticism and denunciation of political and social injustice. Satirical shows, in this study, refer to the satirical news components of TV late-night talk shows, as well as internet based satirical socio-political shows, where satirical commentary forms the common thread with prophetic witness, namely the indictment of political and social wrongdoing. Specific shows referred to in this study are The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, Jimmy Kimmel Live!, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, Honest Government Ad, and Jonathan Pie. The angle of this paper differs from other studies in that it does not look at Christian/religious themes specifically, rather any issue warranting a prophetic voice, but which is often absent. The challenge addressed in this article is to see if a link between contemporary political satire and prophetic witness can be justified theologically. A cursory overview on satire in the book of Jonah as the most comprehensive representation of the genre within the prophets is done, as well as a discussion on possible prophetic themes and examples in a selection of political satire programmes. The study concludes that, while political satirists are not prophets, when interpreted in the context of God's kingdom, they do at times speak prophetically.*

*Keywords: prophetic witness, Trevor Noah, Jimmy Kimmel, John Oliver, Jonathan Pie, Honest Government Ad.*

## 1. Introduction

This article juxtaposes two seemingly irreconcilable concepts: on the one hand, the prophetic witness of the church, broadly understood to challenge the status quo where social injustice exists (Tisdale & De Wet, 2010, p. 7), bringing an alternative consciousness of the existing dominant culture (Brueggemann, 2018, p. 3); prophetic witness is generally accepted to be founded on eighth century BCE pre-exilic prophets (De Gruchy, 2016, p. 1). On the other hand, contemporary satirical political shows: the American late-night shows (specifically the news monologue sections) of Trevor Noah and Jimmy Kimmel, and John Oliver's weekly actuality show; also, two parodies, *Honest Government Ad* (Australian), and *Jonathan Pie* (British). The book of *Jonah*, perceived by some researchers to be wholly satirical, features as a theological bridge

between prophets and political satirists. Comparing the ideas of prophetic witness with satirical shows, the article investigates the possibility that contemporary, mainstream (i.e., secular) comedians can be viewed as conveyors of prophetic messages.

## **2. Methodology**

The largest concentration of satire in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament appears in the prophetic literature (Patterson, 2007, p. 57; cf. Ryken et al., 1998, p. 2563), but rather than sourcing the extensive prophetic oeuvre, the book of *Jonah* serves as main example of prophetic satire. Research was done by means of a literature study on the subjects of prophetic witness, humour, and satire in a biblical context, as well as various studies on *Jonah* (cf. Section 3.).

Concerning the satirical shows, a qualitative content analysis is done, and relevant messages within the context of the chosen themes are discussed. Three American shows were selected: *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. Of the diverse themes featured on these late-night shows, the specific issue of the mass shooting at Robb Elementary School on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2022 was chosen. A further two shows, with the thematically contrasting theme of climate change, were chosen: *Jonathan Pie*, done in the UK, and *Honest Government Ad*, an Australian programme.

There are several reasons for the choice of programmes: combining mass shootings with climate change was firstly a practical decision, in that mass shootings are not a problem in (Western) countries outside of the US, and are thus not addressed by non-US satirical shows. The greatly divergent topics also reflect the spectrum of issues and styles represented in both satire shows and prophetic witness. Although the programmes are diverse, apart from satire, an important common denominator is their emphasis on speaking truth to power; choosing mass shootings as theme in particular, prompts an assessment of how comedy shows deal with sensitive, serious subjects without compromising on the humour. Hyers (1969, as cited in Morreall, 1999, p. 3), remarked that comedy manifests a “stubborn refusal to give tragedy and fate the final say”. The two non-American shows are arguably ruder, and an added motivation is to test the boundaries in terms of prophetic witness. Lastly, while an abundance of academic research in various fields on the American shows exists, studies about *Jonathan Pie* and *Honest Government Ad* are not readily available, meaning that a combination of well-known and lesser-known satirical shows is explored.

All the satirical shows are accessible online on YouTube, and served as the main source for the discussion. Shows are assessed by using a holistic approach, taking into account the overall on-screen message (text, audio and video). They are firstly described and analysed within the framework of satirical targets, fake news, democracy, and multimedia techniques. The shows are then compared with, and evaluated in relation to, the concept of prophetic witness, with references to the above, but adding some theological perspectives in order to determine the probability of satirists being involved in communicating prophetic messages.

## **3. Literature review and background**

Regarding the book of *Jonah*, sources covering several (often overlapping) exegetical approaches, were consulted. Focusing on the satirical aspects, these included research on form criticism (Patterson, 2007), rhetorical analysis (Cook, 2019), canonical approach (Schellenberg, 2015), literary criticism and social science criticism (Schäder, 2016), Bible commentary (Nogalski, 2011), and a Palestinian feminism perspective (Sarras, 2015).

Concerning late-night programmes, Anglo-American studies dominate research (Ödmark & Harvard, 2021, p. 281), and often concentrate on topics such as the effect and influence on

viewers' political views (Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018, p. 1060), negativity towards TV news journalism (Fox & Steinberg, 2020, p. 237), and late-night as news provider for young adults (Edgerly & Vraga, 2019, p. 810). Some recent European studies offer examples of empirical, qualitative approaches where creatives and key team members interpret their own roles. These include programmes from The Netherlands (Nicolai et al., 2022), Nordic countries (Ödmark & Harvard, 2021; Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020), and Germany (Lichtenstein et al., 2021).

While several (American) studies have concentrated on the faith of Stephen Colbert as a practicing Catholic, it seems that little academic research, or even popular literature, directly mention the possibility of a link between late-night TV comedian-presenters and Old Testament prophets. It was however already mentioned back in 2005, when American activist-theologian Jim Wallis, in an interview on *The Daily Show*, told the then presenter Jon Stewart that “The Hebrew prophets used humour and truth-telling to make their point, which I think you do very well so maybe you’re one of the prophets” (Kaylor, 2011, p. 207). In 2009, Wallis interviewed Stewart for his own publication, *Sojourners Magazine*, again comparing him to a prophet. This time, Kaylor observes, Wallis added the term *satire* to the list of characteristics Stewart had in common with the Hebrew prophets (Kaylor, 2011, p. 207). Stewart disagreed, replying that they had more in common with Borscht Belt (i.e. a style of Jewish comedy) than the Hebrew prophets (Wallis, 2009). Kaylor, specifically studying *The Daily Show*'s religious coverage, nonetheless concluded that, “Clearly, the comedians on *The Daily Show* are modern prophets [...] creating a better and even more godly society” (Kaylor, 2011, p. 220).

Lindvall (2015, p. 262), also concentrating on religious content, thinks that late-night host Stephen Colbert took on the mantle of Elijah. He draws a particularly interesting comparison between prophets and comedian-presenters by elaborating on Paul's inventory of divine gifts (Eph. 4:11): “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” (Lindvall, 2015, p. 2). These studies specifically look at the religious content of comedic performances (cf. also Schweizer, 2020), while this study instead accepts any topic, mainstream and religious.

#### **4. General use of humour, satire, and parody**

As an initial step, satire and related comedic devices are assessed in terms of suitability for bringing a prophetic message. Some general definitions are given, followed by a look at biblical satire, specifically the book of *Jonah*, which many scholars view as a prime example of a satirical take on an Old Testament prophet.

The definition for satire found in *Britannica* states that

No strict definition can encompass the complexity of a word that signifies, on one hand, a kind of literature [...] and, on the other, a mocking spirit or tone [...] Wherever wit is employed to expose something foolish or vicious to criticism, there satire exists, whether it be in song or sermon, in painting or political debate, on television or in the movies.

(Elliott, 2022).

While satire and humour are often mentioned together, the one does not necessarily imply the other: “[T]he purpose of satire is not primarily humour as much as criticism, using the weapon of wit. A very common, almost defining feature of satire is its strong vein of irony or sarcasm,

using parody, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy, and double entendre” (New World Encyclopedia, 2022).

It cannot be said for certain exactly how and when satire and humour intersect (Park-Ozee, 2019, p. 592), but the determining factor is that satire lambasts a target. On this basis, DeClercq (2018, p. 322) differentiates between a show like *Last week tonight with John Oliver* and the BBC programme *Mock the Week*. Although they use similar satirical methods, *Mock the Week* offers no critique of any sort, making it not poor satire, but not satire at all. A similar point made by Baumgartner & Lockerbie (2018, p. 1063), is that political jokes told by some late-night hosts are not satire, as they merely ridicule the person and not a particular stance taken.

Parody is closely related to satire, and *Collins Dictionary* (2022) defines it as “a humorous piece of writing, drama, or music which imitates the style of a well-known person or represents a familiar situation in an exaggerated way”. *Britannica* stresses that parody mostly ridicules the imitated subject, but can also express admiration or merely be a comic exercise. Boundaries between categories such as parody, burlesque, and travesty, are debatable, and their relationship to satire and comedy can be murky (Britannica 2018). Satire and parody can be combined in a single text to critique some societal issue or institution, but not all satirical texts are parodic, and vice versa (Park-Ozee, 2019, p. 591). This fusion-technique is evident in many episodes of satirical shows, and can also be found in *Jonah*.

## **5. The book of *Jonah***

### **5.1 Comedic devices in *Jonah***

Scholars describe *Jonah* diversely: a unique book with fairy tale motifs (Schellenberg, 2015, p. 366-367); a narrative with a folk-tale dimension (Robson, 2013, p. 193); a short story of theological fiction (Nogalski, 2011, p. 401); the most flippant part of the Bible, heavily permeated with humour (Frolov, 1999, p. 86); a biblical cartoon consisting of word-pictures (Sherwood, 1998, p. 49); a didactic novella (Spangenberg, 2004, p. 806; cf. Schäder, 2016, p. 68 for a comprehensive list).

Many researchers view the whole of *Jonah* as satire or a related genre like parody, in contrast to the prophetic books which only *contain* satire (Patterson, 2007, p. 58). Not everybody finds the book humorous though. Morreall (1999, p. 95) sees it as probably the strongest contender for comedy in the Hebrew Bible, but it does not encourage laughter in general, even though we may laugh at the figure of the prophet; Morreall agrees that it is satire, but says that it does not embody a comic vision of life. To other researchers, the presence of humour in *Jonah* is evident, constantly emerging as part of the irony, parody and/or satire in the book. Van Heerden (1992, p. 392) finds that humour and irony are prevalent and entwined in the message, while to Whedbee (1998, as mentioned by Nogalski, 2011, p. 452), the contradictions between divine and human purposes imply a comedic structure. The depiction of seaweed wrapped round Jonah’s head is a form of slapstick according to Miles (1975, p. 175), while McKenzie (2006, p. 7) thinks the story has many deliberately exaggerated and nonsensical characteristics.

Contributing to the humour are many examples of irony: Jonah confesses God as creator of everything, yet tries to flee from God. Not willing to preach or wanting people to repent, he nevertheless delivered the sorriest of sermons, converting cows as well as the Ninevites he had wanted to be destroyed (Biddle, 2013, pp. 1329-1334). Jonah becomes the most successful prophet ever who, with a five-word sermon, persuades the king of Nineveh to repent, a comic inversion of a general theme in the prophets (Band, 1990, p. 187). In a most ironic twist, according to the sign of a true prophet (Deut. 18:22), Jonah’s success makes him a false prophet when his prophecy is not fulfilled.

About the intersection of satire and parody, Cook (2020, p. 2) observes that, even though irony can be found everywhere in *Jonah*, not all of it is satirical. Spangenberg (1996, p. 495) illustrates the difference by comparing *Jonah* and *Qohelet*, distinguishing between primary and secondary forms of irony. Satirists attack and condemn, whereas ironists placidly reflect on the human dilemma in an upside-down society (Spangenberg, 1996, p. 499). Satire was the best rhetorical device available to portray Jonah as the target of the message, but the author of *Qohelet* had no such aim, merely observing the insoluble incongruities of life. The irony in *Jonah* is therefore of a secondary nature, as opposed to *Qohelet*, which is primarily ironic (Spangenberg 1996, pp. 509-510).

Schäder (2016, p. 145) sees parody as the most probable genre for *Jonah*, but admits that it also contains considerable portions of irony and satire. According to Cook (2020, p. 6), parody in the Hebrew Bible did not mock the original texts, but rather the questionable theology derived from them. *Jonah* not only alludes to earlier prophetic texts, but also Psalms, Kings, and Exodus, and the King of Nineveh surprisingly, maybe mockingly, is aware of biblical texts hinting at Deuteronomy, Exodus, Jeremiah, and Joel (Cook, 2020, p. 6). Steven Bridge (2009, cited in Schäder, 2016, p. 132) provides a comprehensive list of instances where *Jonah* (ironically) parodies other prophets. Some of these are: the prophets are sent to God's people, Jonah is sent to their enemies; prophetic messages are long, calling for repentance, with vague timelines, while Jonah's message consists of one sentence, no call for repentance, and a forty-day deadline; the prophets' messages justify God for punishing his people, in *Jonah* God justifies saving Nineveh.

As far as satire is concerned, Ryken (1987, referenced by Patterson, 2007, p. 59) calls *Jonah* "the greatest satiric masterpiece in the Bible", while Hyers (1987, as cited in Morreall, 1999, p. 42), interprets *Jonah* as a satire on a reluctant prophet. To Spangenberg, *Jonah* is a "short story with a healthy dose of satire" (Spangenberg, 2002, p. 72). Though *Jonah* could be seen as parody, Cook (2019, p. 95) concludes: "Together with other elements such as mocking, ridicule, hyperbole and the comic, the story can be identified more specifically as satire".

## **5.2 Target**

Regardless of their genre of choice, researchers agree that the story has a target, but there is no unanimity as to who or what this target is.

Jonah as an apparent target has been suggested by various scholars: Spangenberg (1996, p. 509; cf. Holbert, 1981, p. 70) says the narrator portrays Jonah as self-centred, lazy, and hypocritical, while McKenzie (2006, p. 7) believes the narrative is meant to be preposterous, as its main purpose is making fun of Jonah and his attitude. According to Nogalski (2011, p. 403), the book is poking fun at the narrow-minded theological perspective Jonah represents, and while several scholars agree that a theological position is being targeted, there is also no consensus about which position that was (Cook 2019, p. 308).

Schellenberg finds an ambivalent relationship between the authors and the character of Jonah, and their criticism of Jonah is at the same time some kind of self-criticism. Jonah is depicted in the style of Elijah and Jeremiah, but he is also fundamentally different from them. Likewise, the authors (literary prophets), while standing in the tradition of earlier prophets, were also clearly distinct from them (Schellenberg, 2015, pp. 367, 371).

## **5.3 Intertextuality, place in the *Book of the Twelve***

At first glance, the book of *Jonah* does not seem to fit in with the rest of the minor prophets, or the *Book of Twelve*, as they are also called. Amongst others, it is described as the oddest of prophetic books (Birch et al., 2005, p. 328) and the most atypical of all the prophetic books, with some calling *Jonah* a caricature of a prophet (Schellenberg, 2015, p. 354). Other researchers

believe that the book is correctly positioned, demonstrated by the high frequency of intertextual links between *Jonah* and other prophetic books (Nogalski, 2011, p. 405; Schellenberg, 2015, p. 358). Band (1990, p. 179) observes that “[t]he intertextual density of the book suggests that the book was originally published as a parody [...]. By definition, any parodic text has one or more pre-texts to which it relates often satirically”.

About the inclusion of a typical thanksgiving psalm (cf. Nogalski, 2011, pp. 427-429) in *Jonah* 2:2-9, Van Heerden (1992: 329) observes that the author switches to poetry suddenly and at the most unlikely place in the narrative. Cook (2019, p. 203) however says that “rather than being the result of ‘misplacement,’ its inclusion here is a strong indication that it should be read as something other than, or in addition to, thanksgiving, such as satire or parody”. Ackerman (1987, p. 242) agrees, thinking that regarding the psalm as satire provides the key to the genre of the *Jonah* narrative. The psalm does not deride earlier texts; the target instead, according to Cook (2019, p. 208), could be either Jonah or the group he represents: if it is specific scholastic classes in Israel, it may be to portray their high-sounding theology as out-of-touch with the actual needs of the people being addressed.

#### 5.4 Themes/messages

The diverging views as to the theme and message of *Jonah* can be partly ascribed to the fact that satire is essentially ambiguous, evident in the contradictions, conflicts and opposing statements within the text (Cook, 2020, p. 5). Concerning *Jonah* 4:11, Kelsey (2020, p. 138) calls the ending of the book famously inconclusive. Not all researchers interpret it as a rhetorical question with an obvious answer, but say it implies a choice between God and Jonah. The more traditional view is that it is an unequal contest (Schäder, 2016, p. 334). As Nogalski (2011, p. 406) explains, “[t]he book holds Jonah’s bigotry up to the light of day so that its readers see how ludicrous that bigotry appears against God’s desire to reconcile with all. The prophet attempts to limit God’s compassion to those like himself, but the book of *Jonah* knows better”. Alternately, Cook (2020, pp. 10-11), argues that when Jonah stands up to God, the reader’s sympathies shift to the prophet because he was rebelling against the religious leaders of the time who failed to answer the critical questions of the day.

Jonah’s experience of God’s mercy as opposed to his justice is based on the passage in Exodus 34:6-7, describing God as compassionate and gracious, yet one who does not leave the guilty unpunished. The challenge is that *Jonah* 4:2, as Sherwood (1998, p. 53) puts it, gives an ideologically abridged version, omitting the reference to retribution. Nogalski (2011, p. 441) says that *Jonah*’s version critiques others, in that Exodus 34:6 always relates to God’s compassion for God’s people, while in *Jonah* 4:2 the prophet is confronted with God’s compassion for the nations. This expanded theological perspective lies at the heart of *Jonah*’s message.

Interpreting *Jonah* as irony, Sharp (2009, pp. 184-185) describes the reference to God’s mercy as a thunderous divine negative: God will not spare, he has always been unmerciful with all nations, and Jonah knows it. Cook (2019, p. 1) thinks that *Jonah*’s answer to the question about God’s mercy should be interpreted satirically as meaning “no one knows, or can know, what God will do” (Cook 2019, p. 1).

Some understand inclusivism as the dominant message, and this has sometimes led to *Jonah* being used to justify anti-Semitic tendencies. Nogalski (2011, pp. 15, 422) however explains that a theology of exclusion is prevalent in the Hebrew Bible, and by satirising this myopic view, *Jonah* challenges particularistic attitudes that ignores God’s salvific work in the world. Niveen Sarras (2015), coming from a Palestinian background, adds an ironic perspective by placing Jonah in an imaginary contemporary Palestinian situation. She concludes that YHWH is not a narrowly conceived tribal God, but that *Jonah* is unexpectedly inclusive.

Cook (2020, p. 1) summarises that “*Jonah* is now read by many scholars as either containing some of these elements together with hints of comedy and humour, or being wholly satirical or parodic in nature”. The many differing, contradictory positions lead to a deeper understanding of the message of *Jonah*, and also reflect the complexity and extent of biblical satire.

## **6. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament prophets**

It is generally accepted that the prophetic witness of the church has its roots in the Old Testament prophets, although Brueggemann (1997, p. 622) notes that the phenomenon of prophecy manifests in enormously diverse ways. De Gruchy (2016, p. 1) comments that these are eighth century BCE pre-exilic prophets, mainly Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and Hosea, who preached repentance and social justice in order for Israel to avoid disaster. The complex landscape of prophecy has its roots in a tradition going back to Moses and Elijah, and includes groups of roaming, ecstatic and cultic prophets and priests, the forerunners of the post-exilic prophets Zechariah, Nahum and Haggai, whose motivating principle was nationalism through adherence to the Torah (De Gruchy, 2016, p. 1,3).

According to Wessels (2008, p. 729), prophets and promoting social justice are synonymous. Prophets scrutinised the plight of the poor and needy, leading to messages which were at times harsh and to the point. The involvement of the prophets in exposing and battling social injustice is a significant trait they have in common with contemporary political satirists.

When talking about the prophets, it is crucial to know that it not only refers to individual persons, but also to a literary corpus (Brueggemann, 1997, p. 622). The literary tradition began with priests writing down and collecting the communications of the prophets during the Second Temple Period. They subsequently became editors who compiled, reworked, and reinterpreted their writings with the goal of bringing specific messages to their readers. This ultimately resulted in the scribes/editors becoming prophets in their own right (De Bruyn, 2013, pp. 75-78).

Though not a deciding factor, it is interesting to note that the Old Testament prophetic ideas do not come to us directly from individual prophets, but rather as edited, packaged presentations, much like today’s satirical shows reaching viewers as a team-created production, even though the host takes centre stage.

## **7. Prophetic witness**

Searle (2020, p. 103) highlights that prophetic testimony is not about generating an itinerary of future events, neither an attempt to equate the Antichrist with Pope Francis, Paul McCartney, or the European Union. This is also true of the sometimes very confident type of political ‘prophecies’, such as predictions that Donald Trump would win a second presidential term and then clinging to that belief regardless, insisting “it was God’s will that Trump remain president” (McDade, 2021, p. 59).

In the Pentecostal/charismatic context, theology has a twofold approach to prophecy: it can refer to God’s revelation about a specific situation (personal or church), and to the church’s prophetic message to the powers (Nel, 2019, p. 4). When mentioning the church’s prophetic ministry, it mostly refers to an inward focused, narrowly defined practice, often manifesting in the giving of personal prophetic messages to individuals or the congregation for their edification; it is frequently motivational in nature and associated with prosperity. This paper is primarily concerned with the church’s prophetic message to those in power; a distinction is therefore made between prophetic *ministry*, on the one hand, and prophetic *witness*, *testimony*, or *voice*, on the other, with the latter terms being preferred.

Some of the characteristics identified with a prophetic witness further illustrate the concept. It is critical towards power structures and societal injustices, countercultural, and challenges the status quo (Tisdale & De Wet, 2010, p. 7), and, according to Gustafson (1988, cited by Koopman, 2012, p. 136), involves courageous criticism. The goal is to create a better future, but prophetic criticism inevitably occurs when the prophet's vision of a new society comes into conflict with injustice - it is however not done merely for the sake of criticising (Koopman, 2012, p. 132). It proclaims what is not of God (criticising), and it points toward the new reality of God's future (energising) (Tisdale & De Wet, 2010, p. 10).

Prophetic testimony involves more than just preaching, it implies action and risk. It is always more comprehensive than preaching or the spoken word (Tisdale & De Wet, 2010, p. 9), and improving the situation of the most disadvantaged must be achieved (Bedford-Strohm, 2010, p. 5). Fortein (2019, p. 8) says the church must be willing to act, and refuse to accept things like corruption, crime, and unemployment. President of the Lutheran Church, Filibus Musa, makes the valid statement that we should never be satisfied with just feeding the poor, but should persistently ask *why* they are poor (Musa, 2018, p. 4).

The prophetic voice is usually seen as an integral part of the church. *The All Africa Conference of Churches* describes the mission of the church as prophetic (Ramantswana, 2019, p. 3), while de Gruchy (2016, p. 5) says that in the Reformed tradition the prophetic is seen as the sign of the 'true church'.

## **8. Satirical shows**

### **8.1. Some general context to the programmes**

While the basic formats of satirical late-night shows, "an elusive hybrid genre" (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020, p. 731) mixing comedy and news, originated in the US, many corresponding programmes have emerged in other countries. Several of them acknowledge the influence of programmes like *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (Lichtenstein et al., 2021, p. 1761; Ödmark & Harvard, 2021, p. 287; Nicolai et al., 2022, p. 2057).

*Jimmy Kimmel Live!* is broadcast nightly on the American ABC network, and is the longest running of the late-night talk shows. *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* is a Comedy Central programme, broadcast Mondays to Thursdays, and presented by South African born comedian Trevor Noah, from September 2015 to December 2022. Noah took over from Jon Stewart, who steered the programme more towards news and political satire. While Kimmel's and Noah's shows feature current news events mostly in their monologue sections, *Last week with John Oliver* is broadcast weekly on the US pay TV channel HBO, focusing on socio-political actuality (as opposed to current news) issues of any nature. Excerpts of these programmes are made available on YouTube close to the original broadcast dates.

The topic for this study, that is, the mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, happened on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2022, when Salvador Ramos shot and killed nineteen students and two teachers with an AR-15 style assault rifle, which he had bought legally after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday some days before the attack. It was the third deadliest school shooting in the US to date.

Internet based *Honest Government Ad* shows are Australian, left leaning satirical parodies based on a government communiqué-format, independently produced since 2016. It is presented by actors posing as 'Australien' government spokespersons. The 'Coat of Harms' used in their videos apparently played a role in the changing of the *Criminal Code Act*, clamping down on the impersonation of government agencies, providing some evidence of the programme's impact (The Juice Media 2022, November 15). *Jonathan Pie* features a fictional TV news reporter, created by British comedian/actor Tom Walker. The usual format consists of Pie furiously

ranting in between camera takes about the news story he is recording links for. *Jonathan Pie* has been going since 2015 and, like *Honest Government Ad*, is posted online intermittently, covering an assortment of current actuality issues.

## **8.2. Satire shows targets**

Although primarily parodies, both *Honest Government Ad* and *Jonathan Pie* have definite targets in all their shows. *Honest Government Ad* imitates typical government sponsored Public Service Announcements (PSAs), but instead of supporting their own policies, the ‘government representatives’ are sarcastic, cynical, and unequivocally against government and its financial supporters. Referring to the role of big corporations, the presenter remarks: “What’s that? You thought our job was to keep you safe? Aww sweetheart, our actual job is to keep them safe from you” (The Juice Media, 2022, April 10). *Jonathan Pie* routinely criticises British Government politicians such as PM Boris Johnson (Jonathan Pie, 2021). They seem to oppose government mismanagement much like any Old Testament prophet would, and equally as much as the present-day church’s prophetic voice (ought to be).

Regarding tragic events such as mass shootings, joking about them invariably happens; questioning at which point it becomes acceptable to do so occurs sporadically. The political satirists under discussion approach events such as the Uvalde school shooting cautiously, while leaving the humour requirements of the shows intact.<sup>1</sup> The guiding principle in this context that news satirists mostly believe in is ‘punching up’ (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020, p. 742) and not making fun of marginalised, vulnerable people. A few satirists do not mind ‘punching down’ (Ödmark & Harvard, 2021, p. 288); *The Daily Show* mocking Trump supporters may be a form of this. Coming from a philosophical angle, Gimbel (2018, mentioned by Marra, 2018, p. 168), cautions that jokes intending to harm are morally problematic *and* aesthetically poor, and humour creators must realise that there are consequences inherent in the use of humour.

In relation to mass shootings, the victims are treated with sympathy and respect. The targets in this case are however mercilessly satirised: officials, the gun lobby, politicians, media personalities, and all of their ideas - ideas which are frequently so absurd that they provide the shows with ample material already embedded with the seeds for satire. Amongst others, Noah ridicules former NYPD detective Pat Brozman, who proposed the installation interlocking doors at schools acting as mantraps with tripwires, gunshots, and broken glass, trapping the shooter like a rat (The Daily Show, 2022, June 1); so too, former FBI agent Maureen O’Connell’s suggestion of colourful, ballistic blankets on the class room walls is met with derision by John Oliver (Last Week Tonight, 2022). Senator Ted Cruz’s idea that there should only be one door at a school is mocked by Noah and Kimmel amongst others; *The Daily Show* dedicated a whole insert to this concept: contributing presenter Michael Kosta goes out on the street to investigate how other countries deal with their door problem. He interviews a number of foreign (most likely) tourists who, for the most part, do not comprehend what Kosta is talking about, while he evidently cannot understand why they keep talking about gun control instead of effective door functionality. Making use of deliberate farce-like misunderstandings, the central message emphasises the preposterous nature of the door argument (The Daily Show, 2022, June 3). The satirists’ main argument with regards to gun violence is that the easy availability of firearms is a fundamental problem, yet, those in authority would rather propose anything but stricter gun control as a solution. These shows effectively make that point.

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<sup>1</sup> Political cartoons fall outside the parameters of this article, but because they routinely react to mass shootings, it is worth commenting. The humour is often caused by highlighting the absurdity of the situation, and any laughter is triggered by the contradiction between the serious and the comic.

### **8.3. Discrediting fake news and untruths**

Satirists regularly repudiate misinformation, which in essence, has some interesting parallels in the prophetic writings, i.e., Amos, and Jeremiah, discussed in more detail in the evaluation below (Section 10).

Satirical programmes fight misleading campaigns and slogans with the expected humour and satire. Following, are four examples of how they approach different propagandist messages: *Honest Government Ad* ridicules the deceitful practice of claiming carbon credits for planting already grown trees, sarcastically commenting that “soon we’ll run out of space to plant trees that are already there” (The Juice Media, 2022, April 10); *Jonathan Pie* suggests that attention is deflected from the real causes of climate change by focusing on trivialities: “[W]e are responding to [...] the biggest crisis that humanity has ever faced, by saying, ‘oh yeah let’s change our cotton buds’” (Jonathan Pie, 2021); Jordan Klepper from *The Daily Show* poses as an arrogant hand gun trainee, satirically disproving the often-repeated slogan of ‘the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun’ (The Daily Show, 2022, May 27); and, scrutinising school security, John Oliver finds a range of absurd incidents involving security officers, like causing even more casualties, bringing charges against a student for throwing a paper aeroplane, and charging a five-year-old with battery of a police officer. Oliver concludes that school police are not the answer to school shootings, and that children “definitely deserve better than the fundamental lie that the only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy who can arrest a five-year-old” (Last Week Tonight, 2022).

### **8.4. Defending democracy**

Many scholars accept satire as a power for democracy, with satirists seen as credible socio-critical authorities; they explain politics in a relatable way, and fulfil the role of antagonists in relation to scepticism about political elites (Lichtenstein et al., 2021, p. 1757). Ödmark & Harvard (2021, p. 282) point out that that satire should be seen as one segment of a range of different types of media discourse performing various deliberate functions.

In defending democratic ideas, late-night and online satire often place them at odds with opposing convictions. They do not however hesitate to name and shame powerful politicians and organisations such as the US Congress or the National Rifle Association (Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2022, May 26), or media personalities, such as Kimmel comparing Fox News presenter Tucker Carlson to Nazi Party propagandist Joseph Goebbels (Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2022, May 27). And Trevor Noah sarcastically breaks the news that a new bill has been announced, banning the sales of handguns, and allowing the government to buy back assault rifles “[pause], in Canada” (The Daily Show, 2022, June 1). It may be tongue-in-cheek, but it also is unmistakably criticism of the government.

### **8.5. Multimedia techniques**

Jimmy Kimmel’s first reaction to the Uvalde shooting (Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2022, May 26) provides an example of what a prophetic message may look like in a contemporary setting. The programme is divided in two parts, starting off with a visibly emotional Jimmy Kimmel delivering his monologue without the studio audience, in which he attacks those in power for refusing to allow stricter gun control. This is followed by a montage proving the communicative power of innovative video and sound editing. In contrast to the monologue, it is fast, angry, and uses sarcasm and irony persuasively; it rapidly switches between concise, contrasting snippets of hard news facts, interview soundbites, politicians’ opinions, and political campaign ads featuring (Republican) politicians practicing target shooting. The insert successfully emphasises the mindless arguments in the pro-gun lobbyist stance. The synthesis of a particularly serious

monologue and undeniably ironic visuals and sound creates what could probably be regarded as a prime example of artistic, contemporary prophetic witness.

## **9. The question of foul language**

Cursing often features in the content of popular mass media entertainment, and this is also true of some of the satirical shows discussed in the study. On occasion, the swearing is excessive and appears unmotivated, and an initial reaction may be that such language is irreconcilable with a prophetic witness, especially when considered from a (conservative) Christian perspective. From a mainstream (secular) perspective, scores of studies in various disciplines ranging from linguistics to psychology to communication, exist; it suffices to refer to Vingerhoets et.al. (2013, p. 288), who summarise the situation by saying that swearing has become a new norm in contemporary language usage.

As far as the media is concerned, McCreary (2014, p. 80) observes that the vast number of media outlets increases competition, and in order to attract bigger audiences, broadcasters push the boundaries of indecency, inundating the market with risqué content and language. McCreary also thinks that viewers may not always take programming free of profanities seriously, since it does not reflect reality and do not represent all human interactions (McCreary, 2014, p. 71).

The swearing on the late night shows is usually bleeped out. With John Oliver, however, one may get the impression that it is sometimes purposely employed to get audience reaction, making it seem forced. By contrast, in both *Honest Government Ad* and *Jonathan Pie*, cursing is prevalent. *Honest Government Ad*, for example, has a standard routine where the presenter number crunches on a calculator, always getting the same result, namely zero [paraphrased]; carbon offsets become “f---offsets” (The Juice Media 2022, April 10), and government’s response to flooding is “Get f---en used to it” (The Juice Media 2022, March 17). This may add to the irony: expletives delivered by innocent looking hosts with smiling faces has a jarring effect, accentuating the hypocrisy of the persons or organisations under scrutiny.

*Jonathan Pie* routinely features Pie’s ‘scripted’ programme links, representing the professional wording associated with mainstream actuality programming and which supposedly underlines the truth of news reporting: his ‘off-camera’ cursing, however, displays conversational language with no pretence. The implication is that the exemplary language could be hiding fabrications, while the bad language is, ironically, revealing the truth.

It may be challenging to justify a prophetic voice utilising obscene language, but it should at least not be summarily excluded. As late-night host Stephen Colbert succinctly puts it, “[i]t’s all well and good to offer thoughts and prayers, but sometimes you need shouts and swears” (Bendix, 2019). Two aspects are relevant: firstly, one’s view on swearing is largely based on personal convictions (cf. Schweizer, 2020, pp. 39, 42), while secondly, there is no parallel to profanity within the church’s idea of prophetic witness. It is unthinkable that someone like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, known for bringing a true prophetic message, but also for his sense of humour, would ever do an expletive-filled rant like Jonathan Pie. These programmes should however be interpreted in the context of contemporary satire, with their language providing a level of authenticity, which is an important attribute of communication.

## **10. Evaluation: some arguments for and against satirists as prophets**

### **10.1. Where have all the prophets gone?**

The perceived absence of a prophetic voice by the church is a major reason why political satirists could even be considered as communicators of the prophetic witness. This absence is quite

evident in the South African context in the difference between the pre- and post-democracy periods. Several South African theologians have noted that during apartheid, activists took on the political system and government in word and action, but now the situation has changed (cf. De Gruchy, 2016, p. 4). Cilliers (2015, p. 379) says that the church's prophetic voice has become silent, and Fortein (2019, p. 5) agrees that it is silent on key issues, while Kgatle (2018, p. 1) argues that it is not silent, just rather weak. One may wonder though if that makes any difference.

McMickle poses the question of where all the prophets had gone. He gives the answer in the form of his own adaptation of a well-known anti-war folk song by Pete Seeger, *Where have all the flowers gone?*

Where have all the prophets gone?  
Gone in search of mega-churches, every one.  
[...] Gone into a ministry that places praise over speaking truth to power every one.  
When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?

(McMickle, 2005, p. 7, 11).

South African theologian Robert Vosloo also mentions prophets who are overly interested in profits. He relates a quote attributed to Trevor Noah, that instead of feeding 5000 hungry people like Jesus did, they are being fed by 5000 hungry people (Vosloo, 2019:1).

## 10.2. Comedians and entertainers

Satirical show hosts are typically known for primarily being comedians, actors, and performers. Satirists' own opinions about their roles vary though: while North American satirists have emphasised that they are comedians first and foremost (Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020, p. 734), German satirist interviewees from different performance backgrounds reject the comedian description (Lichtenstein et al., 2021, p. 1763), but they at the same time (paradoxically) see their work to be multifaceted with no definitive distinction between political satire and apolitical comedy (Lichtenstein et al., 2021, p. 1756).

The close association of satire with journalism raises interesting debates about the exact nature of the relationship between satirists and journalists. Koivukoski & Ödmark (2020, p. 738) found that in practice journalists still do most of the investigative work, while comedians keep writing the jokes. The integration of journalistic principles and comedy has led to satire news being described as investigative comedy, and defined by Nicolai et al. (2022, p. 2058) as a subgenre of news satire shows. Elsewhere, it has been called "entertainment with an attitude" (Lichtenstein et al., 2021, p. 1762).

Marra (2018, p. 163) stresses an intriguing point, understanding comedians to be public philosophers. She mentions that John Oliver and Stephen Colbert, amongst others, have been recognised as such, and featured in for instance online philosophy media.

Biblical prophets are occasionally described as dramatic performers. Sherwood (2006, p. 01.2) for instance points to prophets "baking bread over dung, going naked and barefoot, marrying a prostitute, putting a yoke on his shoulders, or offering up parts of his own body as both material and stage for prophetic tropes". Almost directly corresponding to these are the regular skits and mock inserts (cf. Jordan Klepper and Michael Kostas above) featured in satirical shows. Mathews (2010, p. 2) claims that much of the prophetic literature could be regarded as poetic drama, and prophets are sometimes identified as poets (Wessels, 2008, p. 729), wordsmiths painting pictures with words, so to speak, and it seems reasonable to connect these with contemporary multimedia performance. In addition, prophetic endeavours could learn from the slick, creative production methods such as those used by *Honest Government Ad* and others (cf. Section 8.5).

### 10.3. In God's name? Speaking truth to power

From a prophetic perspective, the question arises whether it is even possible to preach God's truth without doing it (directly) in God's name. Satirical shows would never claim to do so, and even Christian hosts like Jimmy Kimmel and Stephen Colbert do not profess to bring divine messages. Moreover, someone like Trevor Noah sometimes makes quite anti-God quips, while the Jonathan Pie character's references to Jesus are bound to make some Christians feel uncomfortable. Satirists might understandably not be interested in being prophets bringing God's message, but, conversely, there is no guarantee that someone who professes to be speaking in the name of God is doing so either - in fact, they often talk ridiculous and irrelevant nonsense.

Proclaiming God's message without God can probably (at least partially) be motivated by an important characteristic political satirists and prophets periodically share: in taking the side of the powerless against the powerful, satirists mirror the prophets. Just like the prophet Amos did not hesitate to criticise the oppression of the poor and weak by sarcastically calling the rich women in Samaria "the cows of Bashan" (Amos 4:1), Jonathan Pie frequently insults immoral politicians, *Honest Government Ad* denounces government dishonesty, and John Oliver regularly exposes unjust social issues.

Lichtenstein et al. (2021, p. 1764) observed that some satirists emphasise their goal of making a constructive contribution to society, addressing societal problems such as global warming and deficits in the healthcare system. Dutch comedian Arjen Lubach supports ridiculing the ruling power as a healthy part of democracy, although he does not always want to be occupied with changing the world (Nicolaï et al., 2022, p. 2067). Even so, unintentional critical commentary (and the truth) often still comes through in comedy.

Defending democracy (see Section 8.4) on occasion calls for activism, and the convergence of satire news and activism has been aptly called *satiractivism* (Lichtenstein et al., 2021, p. 1759). With reference to prophetic witness, Kgtle (2018, p. 5) explains that "[t]he prophetic voice should not change just because of democracy but be consistent throughout history". To be clear, prophetic witness does not support any particular political order; rather, it concerns itself with (its understanding of) the principles of God's reign (the same applies to the prophets – cf. the Samuel narratives regarding theocracy vs monarchy).

In an ironic reversal, satire news programmes, which have been called fake news in the past, are now consistently exposing the practice. The same principles of uncovering fake news and falsehoods (cf. Section 8.3), present in satire programmes, can be found in prophetic writings, though naturally in a different guise. On a political level for example, the prophet Jeremiah warns the Babylonian exiles not to listen to over-optimistic prophets who are lying to them and giving them false hope; instead, they must settle down and live peacefully in that city (Jeremiah 29:4-9). And in the context of societal injustice, Amos accuses greedy traders of using dodgy scales, ultimately enabling them to sell poor people into slavery (Amos 8:5-6).

While the prophets deliver their messages in an especially serious way, the satirical programmes approach it with humour. The goal of exposing false information is the same, but the satirists demonstrate the possibility of communicating those same (serious) messages in a comedic style.

The spread of misinformation must be resisted wherever it transpires, whether by governments or local social media groups or the church. Prophetic witness is fundamentally about speaking truth to power, but also sometimes simply about speaking truth.

#### **10.4. Emergency prophets**

Concerning the Old Testament prophets, outsiders were apparently called in when the designated personnel failed in their duties. According to De Bruyn (2013, p. 6) the priests were initially ordained to fulfil the task of prophecy, but a separate prophetic office came into existence because the priests had failed. Prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah were indeed priests as originally intended, but the priestly class often saw the prophets as uneducated outsiders, while the prophets criticised the religious cult and the king (De Bruyn, 2013, p. 3). Utilising prophets as an emergency measure made them special envoys when the situation called for it. The failure of the priests in their prophetic duty serves as a warning to today's church that, to be relevant, the church must fulfil its prophetic duty (De Bruyn, 2013, p. 7). Considering this, comedians may well occasionally function, described in contemporary terminology, as 'freelance' prophets bringing prophetic insight when circumstances call for it.

#### **10.5. Contemporary prophets: Making the circle bigger**

The present-day understanding of the description 'prophet' has moved away from conventional views. It includes, as can be expected, anti-apartheid preachers such as Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naude (Cilliers, 2015, p. 374), but lines between faiths, and between religious and secular, have as well become blurred, and includes Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela (Hofmeyr, 2019, p. 8), climate activist Greta Thunberg (Boucher, 2019), and pop artist Roy Lichtenstein (Mercurio, quoted by Jorider, 2022).

Theologians furthermore regularly link prophetic witness and public theology (De Gruchy 2007: 38), a theology which also seems open to the idea of welcoming non-theologians into its midst. Storrar (2007, p. 27) remarks that the twentieth century model of a single prophetic voice is making way to a collaborative approach to public witness, involving faith communities and the marginalised, in addition to scholars and experts. More specifically, Van Aarde (2008, p. 1214) argues that public theology is not about theologians or pastors doing theology in the public square, but it is the activities of film directors, artists, novelists, poets, and philosophers. He adds that "[p]ublic theology emerges in multifarious facets: in movies, songs, poems, novels, art, architecture, protest marches, clothing, newspaper and magazine articles" (Van Aarde, 2008, p. 1216).

Unrelated to prophecy but relevant to the idea of external contributors is Schweizer's (2020, p. 162) observation that even openly irreverent and subversive religious comedy can be "a vehicle for legitimate religious explorations, advancing theological knowledge, and sharpening critical thinking". It seems reasonable that including traditional outsiders into an inclusive circle of contemporary prophets and public theologians, can, in principle at least, also be applied to satirists.

#### **10.6. A Kingdom of God perspective**

The shows evaluated in this study obviously are not part of the church and, as such, not part of the prophetic witness of the church. To appreciate satirical performers' role, however, it is necessary not to limit the tenet of prophetic witness to the context of the church, but to position it within the wider milieu of God's government (kingdom). Writing from a missional perspective, Verkuyl says:

The kingdom of God is that new order of affairs begun in Christ which, when finally completed by him, will involve a proper restoration not only of man's relationship to God but also those between the sexes, generations, races, and even between man [sic] and nature. This is the message of the prophets.

(Verkuyl, 1978, p. 198).

## 11. Conclusion

This study explores a possible link between contemporary satirists and the church's prophetic witness, which is primarily based on biblical prophetic writings. The book of *Jonah*, being satiric and parodic to a large degree, represents the existence of the satire as found in other prophetic books. It accentuates satire as an important common feature between prophets and satirists, laying a crucial foundation on which the discussion is constructed.

Varied political satire shows are described and, when evaluated against the background of prophetic witness, it is found that they, in addition to the use of satirical humour, concur in several other instances. Importantly, both side with the vulnerable, disadvantaged, and those in dire positions, in confronting societal issues and targeting those in power who are able to change situations but do not, and those who are simply greedy and corrupt. This underlines the concept of speaking truth to power. Seen from a theological position, sometimes 'speaking truth to power' and 'prophetic witness' could be regarded as synonyms.

Satire news as investigative comedy could aid prophetic witness, challenging it to be more vocal about real issues and be relevant to the world around it. Also, in a brief look at use of bad language in satire shows, it is noted that, even though it is foreign to prophecy, it presents some unexpected positive aspects, such as authenticity, and even conveying truth in an ironical manner.

Individual satire news hosts may not see themselves as prophets, but the same concepts found in the prophets' use of poetry, creative writing, and dramatic performance are, in principle, paralleled in the humorous and entertaining inserts, dramatisations, and multimedia usage in satirical programmes.

The study indicates that emergency prophets were appointed in times of biblical prophets failing in their duties, in a sense amounting to a form of outsourcing of the profession, an accepted practice in contemporary society. Together with the theologically established motivation for the acceptance of artists, filmmakers, writers, and more, as prophetic witnesses, and using a comprehensive kingdom model, it seems reasonable to consider a link between prophecy and satirists. Besides, the Bible portrays Jonah as an unusual, unlikely prophet, in a sense opening the door for other unlikely prophets.

Regarding the aim of the article, it is hoped that a contribution to two disparate fields will be made. Firstly, it may promote interest in humour and satire in the biblical prophets, accentuating its value in the field of humour research. Also, because their concepts differ considerably from late-night shows, it may be rewarding to do qualitative research, including maybe interviews with the creators, on *Honest Government Ad* and *Jonathan Pie*, not in a religious context, but in terms of their motivations, subject research, and objectives. Secondly, the real challenge, however, may be to theology, where prophecy is normally approached from a serious, often conservative angle, and accepting the principle of joking prophets would cause a dilemma. Nevertheless, it should earnestly consider in what ways satire shows could benefit the bringing of prophetic messages. Marra's (2018, p. 163) remark that philosophers must take the political power of comedians seriously may apply equally to a theology of prophetic witness.

In conclusion, it is suggested that although contemporary political satirists are not prophets, they can still be prophetic from time to time.

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