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A TIME TO LAUGH:

RELIGIOUS HUMOR IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

By Mikhail Sergeev

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“For every season, and for every
activity under heaven its time:
a time to be born and a time to die;
a time to plant and a time to uproot;
a time to kill and a time to heal;
a time to break down and a time to build up;
a time to weep and a time to laugh...”

Ecclesiastes 3:1

“Only a sage tears down
by laughter the veil of being.”
Isaac Babel

Introductory Observations

The expression “religious humor” may seem like an oxymoron to some people. Religion is a serious endeavor and when it comes to salvation, jokes may indeed be irrelevant and inappropriate. To illustrate this point, let us turn to the Bible—the book of books that contains dozens of religious, moral and philosophical treatises. In the Bible, one can find an expression

for any and every human emotion. Here, a person can read about courageous exploits, violent outbursts, sexual escapades, moral faithfulness, tender love—anything, it seems, but laughter.

To be clear, festivity and joy were not forbidden to the ancient Hebrews. The wisdom of God himself “was daily [the Lord’s] delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”¹ Nevertheless, the heroes of the Old Testament rarely gave themselves to laughter. The story of Sarah, the wife of Abraham is quite revealing in this respect. God promised an elderly Sarah that she would bear a child to her husband:

So she laughed to herself and said, “At my time of life I am past bearing children, and my husband is old.” The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Can I really bear a child now that I am so old?’ Is anything impossible for the Lord?” Because she was frightened, Sarah lied and denied that she had laughed; but he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”²

Sarah’s laughter in the eyes of the Lord was sinful because it manifested her lack of faith. That is why when she later gave birth to Isaac, she was punished by her own shortcoming: “God has given me good reason to laugh, and everyone who hears will laugh with me [since] I have borne [Abraham] a son in his old age.”³ Incidentally, the name of Abraham and Sarah’s son Isaac in Hebrew also means “he will laugh.”

When it comes to humor and laughter, the writings of the New Testament are no different from those of the Old Testament. The Gospels are full of tragedy, not fun. One of the Russian thinkers of the Silver Age, Vasily Rozanov, wrote:

Christ never laughed... I don’t remember if Christ smiled or not. But the imprint of sorrow, of consuming sorrow, is obvious in the Gospel. There are joys in it too, but completely different, schematic, heavenly joys; joys coming from an immeasurable height above the earth and [hu]mankind. Let’s not be deceived by the “lilies of the field”

¹ Proverbs, 8:29–31. Here and later scriptural quotations are from *The Oxford Study Bible. Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha*, ed. M. Jack Suggs et al., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

² Genesis, 18:12–15.

³ Genesis, 21:6–7.

[– it is only] a smile at the earth. The point is that the Gospel really isn't an earthy book, and everything earthy is extremely hard to connect or is simply not connected with it; or if connected then artificially and temporarily.⁴

Still, in spite of the strictness and severity of the Sacred Scriptures, in the history of religion, faith and laughter are not always excluded from each other. The tradition of religious humor had already taken root in the Middle Ages when humor was chiefly connected to various aspects of worship. And, as Mikhail Bakhtin wrote regarding Rabelais, comedic culture created parodied duplicates literally on every aspect of church cult and dogmas:

This so called “parodia sacra” or “sacred parody” is one of the most distinctive expressions of the literature of the Middle Ages [from which] have reached us quite many parodical liturgies, parodies on the readings from the Gospels, on prayers, including the most sacred... on the litanies, on the Church hymns, the psalms... the travesty of various Gospel sayings, etc. This literature is almost boundless. And all of it was sanctified by tradition and to a certain degree tolerated by the Church.⁵

A similar situation took place in ancient Russia as well, where people composed large-scale parodies on the lives of the saints, liturgies, monastic rules, and other edifying texts.

One of the most important characteristics of medieval, and especially, Russian humor, was that it involved, and was often directed against, the joker himself. The comedians played the fool, presented themselves as wretched and insignificant, and amused the readers by their own clumsiness and bad luck. This popular device of lowering the narrator's image accomplished several important tasks.

First, it allowed the author (who was hiding behind a jester's mask) to reveal the contradictions between official church doctrine and its application in real life without any fear of

⁴ V. V. Rozanov, “Sweet Jesus and the Sour Fruits of the World,” in *Ultimate Questions: An Anthology of Modern Russian Religious Thought*, edited and with an Introduction by Alexander Schmemmann, (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), 229.

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekovia i Renessansa* [Creative Works by François Rabelais and the Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance], (Moscow: “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1990), 20.

retribution. The ostentatious impiety of the narrator also reduced psychological pressure that the faithful felt with respect to religious authorities.

Making an involuntary comparison between the characters in the story and themselves, the readers could then realize that they were not such miserable and incorrigible sinners. Finally, laughing at their own feebleness and suffering, the authors of these stories were able to teach a valuable lesson of humility and a humble attitude toward one's offenders, ill-wishers and people in general, along with their weaknesses and vices.

Such was the humor of the leader of the Old Believers in Russia, the archpriest, Avvakum, who in his *Zhitie* (religious autobiography), describes the torments he suffers for his faith as something comical. Here, he makes fun of his own "heroic deeds" while laughing at and pitying his tormentors. Generally speaking, as the academician, Dmitry S. Likhachev, once noted, the "encouragement by laughter in the most emotional moment of mortal danger was always a particularly Russian national phenomenon."⁶ Such was the laughter of Avvakum too—this "peculiar 'religious laughter' which is so characteristic of the ancient Rus' in general [and which served as the shield] from the temptation of arrogance, [as] the worldly exit from sin and simultaneously the expression of patience, humility and kindness toward one's tormentors."⁷

Contemporary Russian religious humor continues the tradition of this spiritual and self-sacrificial laughter. The anecdotes that are gathered here make fun not only of religion and its characteristic attributes, but of human imperfections and shortcomings, which manifest themselves in relation to various aspects of worship. Everything is good in moderation, including religious zeal that is not the goal by itself, but the instrument of spiritual and moral development. There is a proverbial saying in Russia—force a fool to pray to God and he will beat his forehead.

⁶ D. S. Likhachev, A. M. Panchenko, N. V. Ponyrko, *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi* [Laughter in Ancient Rus'], (Leningrad: "Nauka," 1984), 61.

⁷ Ibid., 63.

Many anecdotes portray in a comic light this certain pseudo-piety, the eternal human intention to follow the letter of religion to the detriment of its spirit, while remaining the same stingy, calculating, deceitful, vain, and lustful creatures that care not a bit about their own inner transformation.

Religious anecdotes mock blind imitation of the authorities, literal (and often absurd) interpretation of the Scriptures, inappropriate claims to sainthood, and the insatiable desire to use God and religion in self-interest. Religious humor, therefore, purifies human souls from the filth of intolerance and fanaticism. It awakens respect and compassion toward those people who profess another faith or hold different views and opinions, and belong to diverse races, nations, classes and civilizations. Thus, religious humor teaches us to love and appreciate religion in ourselves and not ourselves in religion—an attitude needed in our contemporary post-Cold War world, stricken by the fever of religious terrorism.

Paradise Lost

Russian religious humor comes from the Judeo-Christian culture and reflects its traditions and values. It is natural, therefore, that many Russian anecdotes are related to Biblical stories, especially those of Genesis. The book of Genesis is about beginnings—the creation of the world, the birth and the sinful ways of humanity. The first two stories in Genesis—those of creation and the Garden of Eden—form the foundation of Biblical philosophy by outlining the relationship between the Divine and the human and by setting the tone for all the subsequent narratives in the Bible.

Most of the jokes that play on the themes of Genesis are also about creation and Adam and Eve. The anecdotes tell the comical counterparts of these two famous Biblical myths. In the

Bible, the Almighty creates a world of perfection where everything is interrelated and is provided a proper place in the harmonious hierarchy of being. In the anecdotes, to the contrary, the kingdom of creation seems rather chaotic, absurd, and out of balance with itself:

In the beginning was the Word... But judging from how things have developed since then, this word would probably be unprintable...

The explanation for such a pitiful state of affairs is paradoxical as well and reminds the reader of the seventh day of creation when God rested from his labor. Maybe God doesn't like hard work? Here is how man tends to portray his Creator in his own imperfect image and likeness:

A man got tired of the pain and suffering he witnessed in the world. He prayed to God:

— Lord, explain to me what is happening? Liars, robbers and drunkards, carelessness and apathy are everywhere. Why wouldn't you stop this? Why wouldn't you free our world from evil and restore righteousness?

The heavens opened and the voice of God uttered:

— Be honest and tell me—do you enjoy working hard?

— No,—the man confessed.

— And I created you in my own image and likeness. Do you get it now?

Still, God is God and man is only man, and the futile attempts to become like the Almighty to acquire superhuman powers and abilities deserve nothing but laughter. As one says:

When God created humans he didn't protect his copyright, and now every fool can do the same.

Here is another example that demonstrates the vanity of these human ambitions:

One man said to God:

— You know, you are not the only one who is able to create!

— Really?

— You've created a man from the earth's dust. I can do the same.

And he bent down and picked up a handful of dirt.

— Hold on,—God says.—Please use your own dirt!

Most of the anecdotes that dwell on the stories of Genesis are devoted to the creation of Adam and Eve, and their life adventures. The first couple attracts so much attention because they

symbolize so many levels of what it means to be human. The archetype of a man, of a woman, the ideal of marriage, the essence of sin—these and other themes make the story of Adam and Eve truly special.

According to the Biblical account, Eve was created from Adam's rib. In the Jewish tradition, this signifies gender equality. Had Eve been created from Adam's head or feet, Eve would have been either superior or inferior to her husband. Instead, she was made his partner and co-worker. Needless to say, many jokes allude to the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam, but often not in a light that is favorable to women. The following two provide an example of what is now known as sexist attitude:

From a conversation between God and Adam:

- Do you care about your rib?
- No... It's just a bad feeling...

And:

Adam is walking along in the Garden of Eden. He is bored. Suddenly God shows up:

— Listen, I made a cool thing for you! It's called "woman." She will love, adore and cherish you. She will fulfill all of your wishes, she will comfort you. She will handle everything, she will be beautiful, smart. She will always understand, always help.

Sex will be amazing...

- Sounds great!
- It does. But I will need your arm and leg for this.
- Hmm... Listen, God, can you do anything from the rib?

To be sure, the jokes give a fair shake to both parties and unleash laughter at the male character too:

In a conversation with a feminist writer one man pointed out:

- But God created man first and only then a woman.
- I also begin with the first draft, the feminist replied.

The comedic irony goes both ways in the following anecdote as well:

Why did God create women so beautiful and yet so foolish?

- Because women have to be beautiful so that men can love them, and foolish so that they can love men.

After all, Adam and Eve must have had an ideal marriage. The anecdotes give us at least two good humorous reasons for that. According to the first one:

Adam and Eve were the happiest couple on earth; they didn't have in-laws.

And the second one:

Adam and Eve had an ideal marriage: he did not have to listen to stories about all the great guys she had a chance to marry; and she never had to hear her cooking being compared to that of his mother.

However, their paradisiacal life, as is well known, was ruined by temptation and sin. The anecdotal version of what really happened that fateful day in the Garden of Eden goes like this:

When God created Adam and Eve he told them:

— No, no, my children!

— No, no what?

— You can't eat the forbidden fruit!

— Forbidden fruit?! We have a forbidden fruit? Eve, do we have here a forbidden fruit?

— No, we don't!

— Yes, we do!

— No!

— Yes!

God:

— Don't even think about eating the forbidden fruit!

— Why?!

— Because I am your creator and I don't want you to eat the forbidden fruit,— said God and felt sorry that he didn't stop after creating the elephant.

In a couple of minutes God saw that Adam and Eve were eating the apple.

— Didn't I warn you, my children, that you are not allowed to eat that fruit?!

— Yes, you did!

— Then, why have you eaten it?

— I don't know. She did it first!

— No, he did it first!

— No, she did...

And as a punishment God has commanded them to raise their own children!

The Word and the Sword

The second large portion of Russian religious humor can be called the “Word and the Sword,” and it includes jokes and anecdotes that develop two other important themes in the Judeo-Christian tradition—those of the covenant and of religion and politics. The idea of the covenant is introduced to the Bible in Genesis—beginning with Noah and even Adam, both of whom receive specific instructions from God, which aim to help and protect them. In the case of Adam and Eve, it was the famous prohibition not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil—a commandment that they didn’t keep and were punished for breaking. With Noah, it was the command to build the Ark that would save him and his family from the flood that was about to drown a sinful humanity.

In the Jewish religion, the covenant is a special agreement sealed by a spokesman of God—the prophet—between the Almighty and those people who wish to enter into the new relationship with the Divine power. Such an agreement always entails mutual responsibilities and especially the promise of assistance and salvation to the faithful on God’s part. Genesis describes a series of those covenants starting from Adam and developing through Noah, Abraham and other patriarchs up to Moses who delivers the Hebrews from the oppressive hand of the Egyptian pharaohs. The covenant with Moses becomes unique and fundamental for Judaism since it contains the law that regulates all aspects of social and moral life of the nation of Israel. Moses tells his people that the fulfillment or breaking of this law will determine the ultimate destiny of the children of Israel.

In the New Testament and the Christian tradition, one encounters yet another covenant between God and humanity, now made through Jesus Christ. Christian Gospels present this covenant as the culmination and the completion of the Mosaic Law. They portray Christ as the

second Adam who came to wash away the sins of humanity and to renew its relationship with the Divine. In the famous Sermon on the Mount, Christ himself addresses the Ten Commandments he came to broaden and to deepen. He states:

You have heard that [our forefathers] were told, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you this: Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors; only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who causes the sun to rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the innocent and the wicked.⁸

When it comes to revelation and covenant, the main characters in the second section of the book are also Moses and Jesus Christ. But since these two figures in the Biblical narrative are truly unique and of gigantic proportions, the jokes rarely touch upon their lives, but instead use their names and the context of their teachings to make a comical point about certain aspects of the religions they had initiated, and especially the stubborn unwillingness of their followers to obey the commandments they had come to proclaim. The examples of this comedic strategy are abundant. Here are, for instance, several anecdotes that mention Moses in this respect:

While delivering God’s commandments to his people, Moses broke the tablet with the eleventh, the most important commandment: “Thou shalt not get caught breaking the previous ten!”

And:

Moses climbs Mount Sinai. People are waiting. Moses does not return for forty days and forty nights. Finally, he comes back and proclaims:

- People, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we agreed on only Ten Commandments.
- And what is the bad news?—Someone asks from the crowd.
- The bad news,—the prophet replies,—is that adultery is still included.

And here are some of their counterparts that play with the Christian themes, such as, for example, the moment when Jesus was walking on water:

I am a believer, but a pragmatist as well. I believe that Jesus walked on water but I also believe that this happened during the winter.

⁸ Matthew 5:43-45.

And:

An American tourist wants to cross the river on the ferryboat and asks the ferryman about the price.

— Three hundred dollars,—the man says.

— Three hundred dollars?! Are you crazy? That is way too expensive for a ride on the boat!

— Well, let's not forget that it's exactly here that Jesus walked on water,—the ferryman explains.

— I am not surprised,—the American replies.—With your prices...

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, religion was often associated with politics. Mosaic Law contained not only moral precepts, but also civil regulations. The successor of Moses, Joshua, became both the religious and political leader of the Hebrews and led his followers to the settlement in the Promised Land. Also King Solomon, the son of David who unified the twelve tribes of Israel into one nation-state, built the Temple that assumed the central role in the Jewish religion for centuries to come.

In Christianity, the association of religion with politics manifested itself when the Roman Empire, the birthplace of the new faith, adopted it as a state religion. The Roman Emperor, now being a Christian, prohibited pagan worship, thus linking the recently-established Christian worship with the imperial power. From then on, the connection of Christianity with the throne became permanent in the Byzantine East as well as in the Catholic West where the Popes in the Middle Ages ruled their own Pontifical States and made wars in the name of Christ and religion. Only with the advent of modern times and especially the Enlightenment, has the inseparability of religion and politics been seriously questioned. Contemporary Western democracies were already built on the new foundation of the separation between religion and state, which allowed both institutions to fulfill their mission without overstepping their respective boundaries.

The jokes and anecdotes that invoke the theme of religion and politics address the issues that are associated with it in all of their diversity and complexity. For instance, there are old anecdotes about Soviet politics and the Cold War:

- Why was the Bible unacceptable to communists?
- Because, according to the Bible, in the beginning was chaos, and God introduced order into it. While the communist experience teaches the contrary—that order was first, and then came the chaos.

Here is another one:

Flight attendant makes an announcement:

— May I have your attention please? The Lord our God is aboard this plane. Passengers have a unique opportunity to ask him personally for any wishes to be fulfilled. One passenger rises and says:

— I am a communist and would like all capitalists to be exterminated.

Another passenger:

— I am a capitalist and wish all communists be exterminated. Then rises an old Jew:

— Dear Lord, after you fulfill the wishes of both gentlemen, please pour me a cup of coffee!

Contemporary American politics and religion are also represented in the collection:

When God wants to punish Americans he sends unto them floods, earthquakes, storms and hurricanes. And when he wants to punish other nations he sends unto them Americans.

And:

A man once saw an angel. The angel said:

— You've lived a righteous life. Tell me what is your deepest wish and I will fulfill it.

— Only one wish?

— Yes, just one!

— I want to be the king,—the man replied,—and to rule the world.

— Well, as you wish,—the angel murmured and disappeared.

And the man turned into an American dollar. He rules over the world now.

Many anecdotes are extremely skeptical with respect to the involvement of religion into party politics:

When God created the earth and its inhabitants he decided to give each human being three qualities—intelligence, honesty and party affiliation. But the devil came along and convinced God that humans do not deserve it. Two qualities, he said, are more than enough. And since then intelligent party members are usually dishonest. Honest party members are often fools. And people who are honest and smart do not affiliate themselves with any party whatsoever.

Most of the anecdotes show a genuine dislike and draw a negative picture of politicians and politics in general. Examples of that are abundant. Here are just two of them:

- What is the difference between God and a politician?
- God does not think that he is a politician.

And:

A man dies and finds himself in paradise. He sees there a huge tree with bells. He asks St. Peter:

— What is this?

— This is the tree of lies,—St. Peter replies,—As soon as someone is lying or cheating someone else, the bells start ringing.

Suddenly a few of the bells started to ring. St. Peter:

— See, these are the sellers who advertise their merchandise.

Almost half of the bells are ringing.

— And now businessmen declare their taxes.

Finally, the whole tree started to tremble and the loudest sound occurred.

— Oh, listen, the election campaign has just begun!

The Eleventh Commandment

A huge chunk of Russian religious humor is actually Jewish. Jews are famous for comedic culture that flourishes in any situation, especially the most tragic ones. In fact, Jews are known for three things—their religious zeal, dramatic national history and a sense of humor. Is there any correlation among the three?

There surely must be—and the nature of this correlation is quite obvious. Long endured hardship and suffering purifies the human heart and develops spiritual virtues. The key to spirituality, in its turn, is in the liberation from egocentric desires—freedom from one's self-importance. This “forgetfulness of oneself,” as the Buddhists call it, leads to seeing and

appreciating humor in every situation, especially in relation to oneself. That is how religion, suffering and laughter are intrinsically linked to each other in Judaism, and that is why religious humor became such an inalienable part of the Jewish religious and national tradition. As the Talmud instructs the faithful, a person can be judged by how readily he laughs with others at himself.⁹

Many Jewish jokes and anecdotes explore the peculiar features of the Jewish national character and of Jewish religion. Those features have been vividly portrayed in the Bible and have become the trademark of the people of Israel.

Jews trace their lineage to the Biblical patriarch, Abraham, and to his son, Isaac, whom God commanded to be sacrificed and whose life he later spared by replacing Isaac with the lamb. Isaac's son, Jacob, became the founder of the nation of Israel. Jacob, whose original name meant "supplanter," struggled with the messenger of God and won. After this incident, his name was changed from Jacob to Israel that meant "persevere with God." This Biblical story marks the birth of a nation. The nation that is endowed with the will and determination to achieve its goals—a strength that, as Jewish history demonstrates, may often turn into stubbornness. The following anecdotic story illustrates the case:

Four rabbis are walking together. The first three are arguing against the fourth on a biblical matter. The fourth lifts his hands to the sky and says, "God, send a sign to show that I am right!"

Immediately, the sun is obscured by clouds and lightning lights up the sky.

"See? I'm right!"

"Bah," say the other three. "A coincidence."

The fourth raises his arms and asks God again, and a lightning bolt strikes a nearby tree.

"So what?" say the three rabbis. "Lightning happens in storms."

Then the clouds part and an ethereal voice booms down, "He's right!"

The three rabbis look at each other and agree that they had, indeed, just witnessed a miracle. "It's still three against two."

⁹ Talmud, Eruvin 65b.

One famous Jew, Jesus Christ, once said that a man could not serve two masters. He worships either God or his own self and in the latter case, searches for power, glory, and wealth. The Bible tells numerous stories about ancient Hebrews facing this painful dilemma and often succumbing to the temptation of idolatry. The one about the Golden Calf is, perhaps, the best known in this respect, and today's jokes and anecdotes portray people's obsession with money as a contemporary parallel to this centuries-old Biblical tale. Here are several examples:

An archeologist dug up in one of Israel's deserts a sarcophagus with a mummy, and he called a museum:

— I found a mummy, 3000 years old, cause of death—a heart attack.

— Very good. Please bring it to us for examination.

A week passes. A call is placed from the museum to the archeologist:

— You were absolutely right about the age of the mummy and the cause of death.

How did you figure it out?

— Very simple. In the mummy's hand was clutched a piece of parchment with the inscription: "Bet 10,000 shekels on Goliath."

And:

— Rabbi, do you consider yourself a righteous man?

— Yes, of course.

— And if you find one million shekels, will you return it without hesitation to the owner?

— If it belongs to a poor man, I'll do it for sure!

From the Bible, we know that ancient Hebrews survived many tests and tribulations, because in the end, they always chose their faith. The Jewish faith, the mother-monotheistic tradition, became the cornerstone of Israel's national existence. And a Jew turned into a symbol of single-God worship. As the contemporary Jewish-American novelist and Nobel prize winner Elie Wiesel noticed, a Jew can be with God; he can be against God; but he cannot be without or indifferent to God. Compiled in this book, jokes and anecdotes draw a similar ambivalent, often paradoxical, but nevertheless strong and engaging portrayal of modern Jewry. Yes, not all of the Jews are formally religious:

A man who wears kippa, does not eat pork, and does not work on Saturdays is an Orthodox Jew. A man who doesn't wear kippa, eats pork, works on Saturdays and does consider himself a Jew—is a Paradox Jew.

And yes, the Jewish religion in its post-Biblical Talmudic version can be sometimes formalized to the point of absurdity:

A Jew asks his rabbi:

— Tell me, Rabbi, can I jump with a parachute during the Sabbath?

— Yes, you can jump alright, but you cannot open up the parachute!

But in spite of all the hardships of carrying the weight and preserving the integrity of their unique cultural heritage and identity, the Jews never seem to lose their almost innate wisdom, charming naiveté, and unparalleled wit. They always cherish above everything else their national pride:

Passengers on the train talk about famous people. A Jew who is sitting nearby, makes remarks from time to time regarding the ethnicity of this or that celebrity.

— Spinoza...

— A Jew.

— Columbus...

— A Spanish Jew.

— Freud...

— An Austrian Jew.

— Bergson...

— A French Jew.

— Chagall...

— A Russian Jew.

— Einstein...

— A German Jew.

— Oh, Jesus, Holy Mother of God!

— Also Jews.

And they are also rightfully proud of the enormous contribution of their fellow Jews to the treasury of world culture:

The Jews had six great teachers:

Moses taught that everything comes from above.

Solomon taught that everything comes from the mind.

Jesus taught that everything comes from the heart.

Marx taught that everything comes from the stomach.

Freud taught that everything comes from what is below the stomach.
And Einstein taught that everything is relative.

Born Again And Again

Christian humor is present in Orthodox Russia in a variety of forms. Christianity was born two thousand years ago and remained a unified force for its followers until the split between Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy in 1054. Later, in the sixteenth century, Catholicism was shattered further by Protestant Reformation, which brought about another division of Christendom. The two main rubrics of Russian Christian humor reflect these historical realities and are devoted to the Western confessions of faith and to the Orthodox people in Russia. In spite of the obvious cultural differences and an antagonistic historical experience of Russia and the West in the twentieth century, those jokes and anecdotes manifest a certain degree of commonality of characters, themes and approaches that originate in the shared beliefs in Christian Gospels and ethics.

In the first rubric, which I call “Born Again and Again,” one can read about the evangelizing efforts of the Christian missionaries and the resisting power of prejudice on the part of the flock:

A parish priest is addressing his flock: “I understand quite well that you place your hopes in God to send you the rain and to save the crop from the drought. However, God helps only those who truly believe in him. And you came to ask God for rain while bringing no umbrellas with you!”

Or:

One well-known city businessman once met the local priest and told him:

— You, probably, noticed, Holy Father, that I don’t visit church.

— Yes, I noticed and I regret this—answered the priest.

— I don’t go to church because there are so many hypocrites there.

— Oh, don’t let that bother you,—the priest smiled. We can always find a place for one more.

At times, the antagonism between missionaries and potential converts reaches unhealthy and even tragic proportions, which makes it an appropriate subject for absurd, if not “dark” humor:

Father Brown was a zealous missionary.
— Why?
— When cannibals put him into a boiler, he exclaimed:
“Let’s hope that now they will develop a taste toward religion!”

Many of the jokes focus on the sinful nature of Christ’s human followers. People are torn apart by lust, greed, and hatred toward their fellow humans. Here is one anecdote, for instance, that mocks the world of business and its obsession with the free market and advertising:

A businessman makes a proposition to a famous TV-evangelist. He promises him \$10,000 for inserting a sentence into the “Our Father” prayer: “And Father, give us our Pepsi-Cola.” The evangelist refuses, and the disappointed businessman exclaims:
— Our daily bread, our daily bread... This he can repeat so many times. Interesting, I wonder how much the local bakers have paid for this?

And here is another one about the ugly face of racism when God sides with the underprivileged and the oppressed:

A black man approaches a church. Near the door he sees a sign: “For white people only.” He turns around, goes away and cries:
— Oh, God, what kind of life is it? Even entering a church is forbidden!
And then he hears a voice from the sky:
— Don’t be too disappointed, man. I am not going to that church myself.

Life is hard on the common people for whom too often, it is only about survival. Problems with legal and medical fees and expenses that are so familiar to average Americans are parodied in the following two anecdotes:

A man regains consciousness after a car crash in an intensive care unit. A doctor asks him:
— How will you pay? Do you have insurance?
— No.
— Cash or check, maybe?
— I am afraid, not.
— Do you have relatives?

- Only a sister, but she is an old nun.
- You know, all the nuns are the wives of the Lord...
- Then maybe you can send a bill to my brother-in-law?!

And:

A man is about to die. He calls for a doctor and a lawyer, and he asks them to stand on the left and right side of his bed. So, they stand there, silent. Finally, one of them asks:

- Why have you called for us?
- I want to die like Jesus,—the man replies,—between the two thieves.

The dread consequences of the harsh realities of life and human imperfection seem to condemn humanity not to deserve salvation or stand a chance in Heaven:

The Pope comes to Heaven. It's time for dinner. God:

- So, let's eat?
- Let's eat!

God opens up a can of meat, and they start eating it. The Pope looks down to Hell and sees that people down there are eating salmon, caviar and delicious fruits. Next day, God says:

- So, time to eat?
- Let's eat!

God opened a can of sardines, and they ate it in silence. In Hell people were eating roasted pork and croissants. The Pope:

- Lord, I cannot understand. Why are we poisoning ourselves here with this junk food while those sacrilegious people are enjoying delicious meals?

God, taking a deep breath:

- Oh, but who will cook a full-course meal for just the two of us?

And even among the Christians themselves belonging to various confessions, there is no peace and mutual understanding, but perpetual conflict and contention. The “Born Again and Again” rubric includes a series of jokes that portray, in a critical light, competing Christian divisions and denominations. Here is one, for example, that addresses celibacy for priests—a characteristic feature of the Catholic Church. The anecdote suggests that celibacy has no basis in scripture and, therefore, is an appropriate target for humor as well as a legitimate subject for reform:

The Roman Pope dies and ascends into heaven. He is introduced to the archangels and personally meets the Lord. The Lord asks the Pope:

— What is it that you wish?
 — I wish,—the Pope says,—to get acquainted with the original version of the Bible.
 One hour later cries and moans are heard from the library:
 — This is unjust! Unjust!
 — What do you consider unjust?—asks God who comes to console the Pope.
 The Pope raises his tearful eyes:
 — Here it says c-e-l-e-b-r-a-t-e, not c-e-l-i-b-a-t-e!

The “true intentions” of Protestant Reformers, in their turn, are ridiculed, in another anecdote that comically describes the emigration and settlement of Puritans in the New World:

History lesson in one of the schools of New England.
 Teacher:
 — Why did the Puritans leave England and come to America?
 Student:
 — To profess their faith freely without the fear of persecution and to force others to do the same.

Finally, the stubborn unwillingness by Orthodox believers to recognize as legitimate the Western confessions and to adjust their Orthodox practices to the challenge of modern times is laughed at in the following anecdote:

The Catholic Pope dies. To honor him, St. Peter himself gives the Pope a tour of paradise:
 — Look, here are Catholics. And here are Lutherans... And there in the park are the Protestants. And here—shh.... Please lower your voice—Orthodox Christians.
 — Why did you silence me? Aren't they God's children?
 — Well, you see, they think that they are the only ones here.

New (Russian) Testament

The second brand of Russian religious humor that is devoted to the Christian religion may be called “New (Russian) Testament.” It targets the Christian tradition in Russia along with the historical realities that seem to be an intrinsic part of the Russian cultural make-up. In the course of the twentieth century, Russia went through radical and often tormenting transformations. First, after the October Revolution of 1917, the Russian Empire, this “Land of the Tsars,” turned into an atheist Soviet Union that survived for three quarters of a century. And

then in the 1990s, the Soviet Union collapsed and Russia, for the first time in its more than a thousand-year history, became a parliamentary republic.

The Soviet period of Russian history was marked by the suppression of religion, the confiscation of church property for the use of the state, and the persecution of believers. Ardent atheist propaganda aimed at completely eradicating religious beliefs, or “prejudices” as it labeled them, from the minds of the Soviet people. This task proved unattainable, as on the surface, the Soviets followed the party line, but while in the privacy of their homes, they still remained faithful to pre-revolutionary tradition.

Anecdotes that deal with these social circumstances bore witness to those underground feelings the Soviets had with respect to religion. Soviet religious jokes often harshly criticized official Soviet atheism. Not only did they mock the Soviet way of life and thinking, but they also demonstrated the incompatibility between communism and Christianity:

A lawyer, a surgeon, a construction worker and a communist debate whose occupation is the oldest. The lawyer said:

— When God punished Adam and Eve and expelled them from paradise, that was a legal decision.

The surgeon made his point:

— First God created Eve from Adam’s rib. And this was a surgical procedure!

The construction worker replied:

— Even before that God created the world—he has constructed it. And before that, as we all know, there was only chaos!

— And who created chaos?—The communist exclaimed victoriously.—Sure, it was us, the communists!

Likewise, Soviet jokes dwelt on the hypocrisy of the communist doctrine that somehow both proclaimed the equality of all people and also discriminated against the Jews:

God was nominated for the election of the party secretary in paradise. “I reject this candidate,”—one person replies.—“He has a son in Israel!”

The anecdotes depicted the absurd reality of Soviet life, which was marked by the abundance of weapons and the shortage of food:

A school boy in the old Soviet times is memorizing a fable:

— Once upon a time God sent a slice of cheese to a crow...

Daddy, is it true that God exists?—he asks.

— Oh, my little baby!—His father replies,—And is it true that cheese exists? It's only a fairytale!

In fact, Soviet-period humor was uncompromising in portraying communist leaders as more devilish than Hitler:

A tour guide in Hell was asked:

— Why does Hitler stand in a sewer up to his neck while Stalin is only up to his waist?

— Because Stalin is sitting on Lenin's shoulders.

Likewise, jokes predicted the inevitable failure of communism:

Presidents Nixon (USA), Pompidou (France) and Brezhnev (USSR) ask God:

— When will my country live well?

— In ten years,—God answers Nixon. Nixon sighed.

— In 100 years,—God replies to Pompidou. Pompidou starts crying.

— And mine?—Brezhnev asks.

The Lord starts crying.

Or another one:

God asks Brezhnev: — When will communists in Russia stop persecuting the Church?

— Not while I am alive,—Brezhnev says,—And in my turn I would like to ask you when will communism win?

— Not while I am alive!—God replies.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the following dramatic events once again brought about unprecedented changes in the political landscape. For the first time in its thousand-year history, Russia became a democracy. Such a drastic political and social metamorphosis had a decisive impact on Russian comedic culture, which had to rediscover its mission in new historical circumstances.

The main character emerging from under the ruins of communism has been the so-called “new Russian” or “neo-Russian.” The prefix “neo” here has an ironical meaning since it suggests that in spite of the fundamental changes in the Russian society, there is really nothing new in the

Russian national character. Democracy is facing enormous challenges in traditionally authoritarian and lawless Russia. The comedic personage of a “new Russian” reveals in a satirical light how this country is adjusting to a new system by either absorbing or magnifying all the negative traits of Western democracies or simply not changing at all.

The “new Russian” is a masterful parody on the Russian version of democracy, democracy in general, and the widespread belief (or prejudice?) that a democratic system can be easily and successfully imported to any country. Instead of personal freedom, however, the “new Russian” is portrayed as a person who is mostly and exclusively interested in money. He is a successful mafia businessman who enjoys the lifestyle of the rich and does not disdain in using any means to increase his wealth and power:

A neo-Russian (NR) was shot by a hired killer. He is on a tour of paradise. He is shown various apartments where he may stay, but he likes none of them. Sometimes the toilet seat is not made of gold, sometimes the bed is too narrow. The archangel finally gets tired and tells him:

— If you don’t like what you see, build your own place.

— No problem!—the NR replies.

He takes his cell phone and places a call to earth:

— Vania, it’s me, Petia, calling from paradise. Listen, did the workers finish my country home? Can you find that hired killer who shot me ASAP and get him to send those workers over to me? They’ve got to start a new project. I have nowhere to live here...

A “new Russian” is self-confident in his abilities to master life, but at the same time, he is an intellectual ignoramus who possesses the cultural baggage of a high school dropout. He pretends to be highly religious since religion looks fashionable in post-Soviet Russia. But his religiosity is purely artificial. In fact, he lacks an elementary knowledge about his faith and even its founder:

A neo-Russian went to a jewelry store. He looked at the stand with the golden crosses for a while and then asked the vendor: “Listen, man, do you have a cross like these but without the gymnast?”

After having committed another one of his crimes, the “new Russian” pays a visit to a church where he donates a sizable chunk of money so that his sins might be pardoned. In spite of his charitable intentions, his chances for Paradise remain slim:

A neo-Russian is standing at the gates before St. Peter. Peter asks him:

— So, have you performed some good deeds in your otherwise sinful life?

— Yup, once I fed a poor man.

— Hmm, what else?

— Well, once I donated \$100 to a church.

— What else?

— I guess nothing...

St. Peter takes his cell phone and places a call. The angels appear.

— So,—Peter says to the angels,—Give this man a hundred bucks, a bowl of soup and get him the hell out of here!

Democratic prospects in Russia in general are likewise presented with a lot of skepticism. The Soviet Union still feels like recent history and its terrifying shadow is flying over the newly liberated mother-Russia:

Moscow’s popular mayor Luzhkov decided to sell Lenin’s mummy from the Red Square Mausoleum in order to raise funds for the city’s budget. The proposal was sent to all the countries and museums around the world. No one expressed the desire to buy Lenin’s remains but Israel. After some thinking, Luzhkov refused to sell Lenin’s mummy to the Jews:

— One of yours has already been resurrected...

Finally, the living conditions of the common people remain miserable, oftentimes worse than in the former Soviet Union, so that even religion seems to be of no help to the desperate Russians who are trying to survive on the small amount of money they get from the state:

Three persons with disabilities are sitting at the bar: a blind American, a mute and deaf Frenchman and a Russian who walks with a limp. Suddenly there comes a light and Jesus appears out of nowhere. He says to the American:

— Since you were righteous, I will spare your pain!

He touches the guy, and the American regains his vision and starts to glorify his Lord’s might. Jesus says then to the Frenchman:

— You were also a good son of mine! Here is your reward!

He touches the guy and the Frenchman regains his speech and hearing powers. He rejoices and starts to glorify the Lord. Then Jesus turns to the Russian, and the Russian screams:

— Please don't touch me! I've got a pension of eight hundred rubbles as a person with disability!

Priest, Swami, and Rabbi

The main purpose of religion is to promote spirituality and peace. Religions provide a sense of dignity to human beings and encourage them to develop high moral values. However, religions are many, and, as we know from history, they always compete with each other. Each religion proclaims its superiority over other traditions and emphasizes the special nature of its message and practices.

Let's take as examples Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Buddhism relies on the uniqueness of Buddha's enlightenment whose teachings, it claims, can be beneficial to humans as well as heavenly beings such as the gods of Hinduism, for instance, over which Buddhism asserted its superiority. The appeal of Christianity rests upon the god-manhood of Christ whose incarnation into the human flesh and unparalleled mediation between God and man brought about salvation from the original sin of Adam to humanity. Finally, Islam builds its authority on the finality of Mohammad's revelation, the last in a series of progressive messages from God to humanity through such prophetic figures as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and countless others, culminating in the final and conclusive word of God by the seal of prophecy, Mohammad.

The jokes and anecdotes discussed under the rubric, "Priest, Swami and Rabbi" reflect this spirit of competition among religions, which unfortunately for the common people led more often to mutual persecutions and religious wars rather than to intellectual debates, inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. Even more unfortunate was that the closer any two religions were to each other, the bitterer the competition became between them. Such is the case with Judaism and

Christianity, for example. The Christian religion was born in the midst of the Jewish faith and Jesus himself, along with the apostles, as well as their early followers who were Jewish. In the course of the first Christian century, however, both religions went their own separate ways. Jewish and Christian religious identities became exclusive and even opposite to each other.

Now, two thousand years after the birth of Christianity, the quarrel between the two monotheistic traditions still continues. There should be no surprise that Jesus Christ himself, who was raised in the Jewish faith and founded his own religion, is in the center of the controversy:

Once an Orthodox priest and a rabbi debated whose religion was better. The rabbi said:

— So, what can your priest achieve?

— He can become a bishop.

— And then?

— He may become an archbishop.

— And then?

— He can become a Patriarch.

— And then?

— Well, he couldn't become God, could he?!

— As a matter of fact, one Jewish boy happened to achieve just that!

It is paradoxical and worth noting that the Jewish claim of superiority over Christianity in the joke above involves the recognition of the Christian belief in Christ as the Messiah, a claim that Jews fiercely reject. Here is another example illustrating the same salient point:

A Jew comes to the rabbi and says:

— Rabbi, what should I do—my son got baptized.

— This is a very important question. I must speak with God, come tomorrow.

The next day the Jew returns:

— So, did you talk to the Lord?

— Yes.

— And what did he suggest?

— He said he has the same problem.

When discussing the relationship between Judaism and Christianity one cannot avoid another highly controversial topic—that of anti-Semitism. Throughout Christian history, anti-Semitic views and practices have darkened the image of Christendom. Instead of glorifying the

Jewish people for giving them their Bible and their savior, the leaders of Christian churches persecuted the Jews and forced them to convert to Christianity. It is only in modern times that Christian countries have changed their social policies and granted full citizenship and equal civil rights to the Jewry. Yet, because of the long history of persecutions and pogroms, the tensions between the mother and daughter religions still persist. What better way to reduce them than to tell a good joke about a Jew coming to the Christian Church:

One Jew had a very stubborn son. He tried everything, but his son never listened to him. Finally, he sent him to the Christian church—let them deal with it. In a month his son was completely changed, doing everything his father asked him to. Curious, the father asks:

— Sonny, what have they done to you at the church?

— You know, Dad, when I went to the church, the first thing I saw was a Jew hanging on a cross... And I said to myself: “These people are serious!”

And here is another example of the same subject matter with an unusual comedic twist:

— I suspect that the Vatican employs an anti-Semitic policy.

— Why?

— They just elected a new Pope!

— And?

— And he is not a Jew, again!

In addition to Jewish-Christian jokes, the section contains anecdotes that poke fun at the relationship among various Christian confessions as well as other world religions. An attempt to foster mutual understanding and cooperation among diverse religious traditions—known as ecumenical movement and inter-religious dialogue—represents, perhaps, one of the most ambitious and significant projects in twentieth-century Christian theology. Without downplaying the importance of these developments, the jokes and anecdotes focus on the problems their participants encounter while putting into practice such a dialogue.

Often they find themselves in a situation where everyone portrays their own faith as uniquely spiritual while denying the same to their partners' traditions. To justify this position, people also tend to project their values into those of the partner:

- What would you call a man who abandons his young wife, his small children, his aging father, his state responsibilities; who gives away all his belongings to strangers; and who runs away in order to do nothing?
- An irresponsible fool.
- Right. And Indians call him the Buddha. See how different we are?

Another common misunderstanding that arises during inter-religious discussions is everyone's unconscious tendency to emphasize other religions' shortcomings. Here is a satirical crash course on world religions that makes fun of such an approach:

Catholicism: Only the priests have the right to commit sins; all others must believe that they do not commit them.

Protestantism: We are the toughest ones—we read the Bible more often than anybody else.

Shi'i Islam: One can kill a non-believer for being a non-believer, and a Muslim for being a bad Muslim.

Buddhism: We venerate other gods as our younger siblings and we accept those who believe in those gods as the slaves of our younger siblings.

Hinduism: I am happy to have been born in the lowest caste. To be a superior is so difficult! When I die I will become a tree and finally can have a good rest.

Confucianism: Each one of your actions is worthy a whip. If you take no action—you deserve ten whips.

To make inter-religious dialogue successful, however, one needs a completely opposite strategy. The followers of all faiths have to humble themselves and realize the limitations inherent in their own spiritual traditions. This is the fastest and surest way to mutual understanding and real and everlasting peace:

One man lost a chess game. He thought that he had suffered a defeat. After being a student of a famous Zen master he realized that he would have suffered a defeat if he had actually won the game. Still unsatisfied he became a disciple of the great Sufi saint who told him that if he had lost the game but was content with the result, then he would have suffered a defeat. Then, he went to the Himalayas and learned from the great Yogi that if he had won but felt guilty because of that, he would have suffered a defeat. Finally, his

friends gave him *The Encyclopedia of Chess Openings* and he finally learned how to develop his pawns.

Sinning is Believing

The next selection of Russian religious humor called “Sinning is Believing” explores the theme of human imperfection or sin and evil as it is known in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Bible introduces the notion of sin second only to that of creation. In polytheistic religions of multiple deities, it was easy to explain the origin of sin and evil. Pagan worshippers saw the universe as a perpetual struggle among various spirits, one of whom was responsible for originating evil. Often this mighty but sinister god was charged with the creation of the world—ruled by time, suffering, and death.

In monotheistic religions, however, such an explanation became impossible since these faiths postulated the existence of only one God, the Lord of the Universe, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and all good. That is why following the narrative of creation, the Bible tells the story of the first couple and the origin of sin. As the story goes, God placed Adam and Eve in the land of abundance and delight called the Garden of Eden, but he forbade them to eat the fruits from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In spite of this prohibition and after having been tempted by the serpent, our primary ancestors succumbed to temptation and tasted the fruits from that tree. As a result, God punished them for their transgression and exiled them from Paradise to live a mortal life full of hardships and suffering.

So in other words, the Bible traces the origin of sin and evil to humans’ free will. In this respect, it does not matter whether one looks at the fall of Adam and Eve as their own personal mistake—as the Jews and Muslims do, for example—a reminder that evil deeds will eventually be met with divine retribution. Or, as Christians believe, one interprets this fall as the Original

Sin inherited by all of humanity and redeemed only by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. In both cases, it comes down to the same moral philosophy. Disobedience to God is the beginning of sin, and humans are responsible for introducing it into the world.

And so it happens that from time, immemorial people struggle against their sinful inclinations and too often lose this struggle to God's adversary, Satan. It is not for nothing that they say sin is sweet:

A client comes to a painter:

— I am here because of my wife. She would like to order a painting for our dining room. She wants something pious and religious.

— Of course. What subject?

— I don't really know. Something from the Bible.

— Fine. What would you prefer? Creation of the world, Adam and Eve, Last Judgment?

— Let it be Adam and Eve.

— How would you like it—before or after the original sin?

— I am not sure about my wife, but personally I would prefer in the middle of it.

In different monotheistic religions, there is emphasis on various kinds of sins. In Islam, for instance, idolatry or the rejection of the oneness of God is considered the gravest and the only unforgivable sin. Even the mentioning of this particular transgression can agitate Muslims who would use a specific term applied to it—"shirk." "Shirk" means idolatry in a very broad sense of associating anything—be it a human person, a thing, or even an intellectual idea—with God. Modern times brought about a new kind of idolatry—this time in the form of scientific atheism that replaced God with the belief in the supremacy of human reason and science:

People often ask whether God exists. We answer this question affirmatively: Yes, he doesn't!

Here is one more joke about atheism, this unfortunate product of our age:

A man is having a hard time falling asleep. His mind is filled with unhappy thoughts. And he cannot rid himself of the question of whether God exists. Does he? Or does he not? Does he or does he not? Suddenly a voice comes from heaven:

— Relax. I don't exist, all right. Go to sleep already!

With the advancement of science and technology, old human vices do not retreat however. Christian teaching warns its followers of being caught in the net of the seven deadly sins—pride, envy, wrath, greed, sloth, gluttony, and lust. The anecdotes add to these several others, including, for instance, lying, self-deception, and driving under the influence:

— Holy Father, I had sex with my fiancée fifteen times a day before we got married. Is this a sin?

— Yes, my son, lying is a big sin.

And:

— Holy Father, forgive me for I have sinned. Several times a day I look at the mirror and see how beautiful I am.

— Please continue, my child. This is not a sin. It's a delusion.

And yet another one:

A policeman stops a car. The driver is a priest. Policeman:

— Have you been drinking, Holy Father?

— Only water.

— But I believe it smells like wine ...

— Oh, Lord, You did it again!

The proper way to deal with sin in the Christian tradition is by making a sincere repentance and confession to the priest. When Jesus commissioned his Apostles to spread the glad tidings of the Gospel, he said to them:

“Peace be with you! As the Father sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathed on them saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.”¹⁰

Orthodox and Catholic Christians believe that the power to forgive sin was transmitted by the Apostles to their successors, bishops and priests, and was instituted into one of the seven Christian sacraments—the sacrament of penance.

Confessing one’s sins is a serious business and it must be done sincerely and in the spirit of true repentance. Otherwise, confession may turn into a mechanical procedure of writing off

¹⁰ John 20:21–23.

wrongdoings the person was never ashamed of in the first place—just like with an old lady from the following anecdote:

An old lady comes to the priest:

— Father, forgive me for I have sinned.

— What is your sin, madam?

— Twenty years ago I cheated on my husband.

— Oh, madam, it was so long ago. God has already forgiven you. Forget it.

— I can't. It's such a good memory!

And even after repentance and confession, one has to stay watchful and to not succumb to temptation again since everybody knows how weak and vulnerable people are and how quickly and easily human passions can lead those astray:

The priest delivers a sermon before high school students:

— My children, never succumb to temptation! It all begins with one cigarette, then—two, and later—three. And then one starts drinking, thinking about sex and money. All this leads to perversion. Do you have any question?

— Yes, Holy Father. Where can we find this miraculous cigarette?

It Will Only Look Like Eternity

The next section of the article called “It Will Only Look Like Eternity” explores the two central concepts of the Christian religion—Heaven and Hell. Heaven and Hell symbolize the idea of retribution that comes to Christianity from Judaism where it plays a dominant role as well. In fact, retribution is the key notion that runs throughout the whole Bible. It is introduced already in its very beginning when God punishes Adam and Eve for their transgression by expelling them from Paradise. Later in Genesis, there are the patriarchs of Israel whom God rewards with numerous blessings for their faithfulness and piety.

Ancient Hebrews were pragmatic people, and in Biblical Judaism, retribution does not extend to the afterlife. Instead, it applies to the human history that is understood as an interaction between the Divine call and man's response. The founding father of the Jewish faith, Moses, tells his followers: choose life and the worship of one God as well as obedience to his law, and you

will gain prosperity; if you choose death and turn to idolatry, you will reap disasters. The subsequent history of the Jewish people bears witness to this fundamental principle. The holy wars and the settlement in Canaan, the creation of a united kingdom and the construction of the Temple, the split of the kingdom into two parts and their respective fall to Assyria and Babylonia, the exile and the following restoration of the nation—all these landmark events in the historical saga of the ancient Hebrews were interpreted by Old Testament authors in light of God's impending and inevitable retribution.

In the New Testament, the concept of retribution went through a considerable transformation. To begin with, Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, served as an example of righteous suffering, a self-imposed punishment—not for his own sins, but for the transgressions of all humanity. According to Old Testament theology (with the exception, perhaps, of the Book of Job), such a righteous suffering seems like a contradiction in terms. Furthermore, the dichotomy of blessing and curse, reward and punishment in the New Testament acquires a transcendent, afterlife quality and becomes a symbol for eternal retribution under the form of Heaven and Hell.

Unlike the Biblical Heaven and Hell, their anecdotal counterparts are often described as interchangeable, even merging with each other. Humans are attached to what they like. Hence, Hell in the anecdotes is only such to those who feel at home in Paradise. While to those who prefer the hellish lifestyle, Heaven would turn into real hell, and Hell itself would seem like the Garden of Eden. This “marriage” of Heaven and Hell finds numerous illustrations in jokes and anecdotes. Here are but a few that talk of the confusion between the two:

- And where would you like to end up after death—in paradise or in hell?
- Paradise is preferable, of course, because of the climate, but hell is less boring because of the companionship.

And:

A man dies and ends up in hell. He looks around and sees— there is a pub on his left, where people are celebrating and drinking beer, having fun with ladies and all of it is for free! On his right, there is a mountain and a door in it. He looks inside—and there is a real hell: heat, caldrons, devils, and so on. The man goes into pub and asks the bartender:

— Why is hell there and here, but here, it feels like paradise?

— Hell? Where?

— Up there, in the mountain...

— Where, again?

— Behind the door...

— Ah, well. That is for believers.

The dialectic between Heaven and Hell takes on an even more absurd and provocative character in the following story:

When Rabinovits died, he was asked where he wanted to go—to paradise or to hell.

— Show me both and I'll choose,—he said.

Here is what he saw. In paradise, the righteous sat at tables and angels read them articles from the newspapers. In hell, people were drinking, playing cards, and looking at naked girls. Rabinovits chose hell, and then he was thrown on the hot frying pan.

— Hey!—he screamed,—You showed me a completely different picture before!

— That was our promotional campaign unit.

Well, it appears that most people are so corrupted that they surely deserve the fires of

Hell:

One preacher was always speaking about the joys of paradise.

— Why don't you tell us about hell?—people asked him.

— There is no need for that, since we will see hell ourselves.

But then who is eligible for Paradise? The anecdotes provide a paradoxical answer to this question as well:

A bus driver and a priest are standing at the gates of heaven. St. Peter approaches them:

— The driver can come in right now, and you, Father, should wait for a while.

The priest is upset and stunned:

— How come? I devoted my whole life to the Church! This man is not even a good driver!

— So what? In your church everybody was often asleep, and aboard his bus everybody was always praying!

And in the end, even though most of us would prefer to end up in Heaven, we wouldn't like to rush there and wouldn't mind staying on Earth for as long as we could:

A priest comes to a bar and asks one of the clients:

— Do you want to go to heaven?

— Of course, Holy Father.

— Then stand up and come to this wall.

He addresses another one:

— And you, my son, would you like to go to heaven?

— Yes.

— Stand by this wall as well.

He asks the third person the same question.

— No,—this man replies.

— You really don't want to go to heaven after death? I don't believe you!

— Yes, I do—but, as you said, after death. And it seemed to me that you were selecting a group of people to go up there right now.

Fun Ever After

Among so many trends of contemporary Russian religious humor, the reader will enjoy a variety of miscellaneous religious jokes and anecdotes as well. For instance, one can find a series of jokes about Bill Gates, computers and the Internet which comically reflect life in modern society that has made tremendous progress in science and technology. We are so proud of contemporary technological advances that we often imagine them to be able to solve our existential problems and provide an answer to the ultimate questions of life. People invent machines to enhance their physical and mental abilities, to prolong the human life span, and maybe someday even to find the secret of immortality. They end up by comparing an afterlife to a gigantic computer lab:

A programmer dies and appears at the Last Judgment. The angels could not decide what to do with him.

— Where do you want to go— to paradise or hell?

— May I take a look first?

The angels brought him to a gigantic computer center:

— This is paradise. You will be a user here.

— And what about hell?

— Hell is also here, but then you'll be a system-programmer.

We idealize our modern technocratic society and instead of venerating religious images pray to the icons of Windows:

A computer programmer's prayer:

— And let F1 help you, and let F2 save you! In the name of Control, Alt and the Holy Del so be it, Enter!

If this dangerous trend continues, Microsoft may well become our new church in the future:

What would the Microsoft Church look like?

1. At the entrance one will have to say a name and a password, which then will be written in capital letters on the wall so that one will not forget it later.
2. In the middle of the service, all the faithful will be asked to leave the church in order to reload the frozen altar.
3. Most prayers will be read in Vietnamese or Turkish.
4. At least once a day, somebody in the church will perform an illegal operation.
5. The day when the dome won't fall from the church and won't kick someone's head, will be considered God's miracle.
6. The head of the church will be informed daily regarding everyone's activity in the church, even the time spent in the restroom.
7. When attempting to find the addresses of the churches of other congregations, the top entry in the list will be the "Holy Microsoft Church of His Holiness Gates."
8. Periodically, instead of icons on the walls, there will appear empty squares with crosses. Still good since one can still pray to the crosses as well.
9. A couple of times a week, while attempting to enter the church, one will encounter the sign: "Entrance is closed. Probably, caused by technical problems in Heaven."

Another series of jokes explores family life and family roles—an eternal theme that is still relevant to our times. Some of these anecdotes may seem controversial—those, for example, that make fun of the in-laws:

A conversation between two friends:

— My mother-in-law is an angel.
— And mine is still alive...

Or:

A husband stops by his in-laws house.
— Have you missed us?—They asked.
— No, I just had a big fight with your daughter and she sent me to the devil's helpers.

The quarrel between spouses is another popular theme in jokes that often take the husband's side:

During a family scandal a wife cries to her husband:

- It would have been better if I were married to the Devil himself and not to you!
- It's impossible. Marriages between close relatives are forbidden.

And:

A dying patient asks a doctor who stays near his bed:

- Doctor, I feel that I have very little time left. What do you think, how long will my wife be alive?
- She is quite a healthy woman—may be 20–25 years.
- Thanks God! For at least 20 years I'll be left alone!

Also, in the variety of Russian religious humor, one can also find a few jokes of a philosophical nature. Does God exist? Is there life after death? How do we achieve salvation? These are significant questions that the anecdotes address humorously first by ridiculing the pretentious arguments of those who claim to have proven the mortality of the human soul:

Two embryos are talking in the womb:

- How can you believe in life after labor? No one has ever returned from there!

And later by poking fun at those who claim to uncover the sacred mysteries of existence:

How is life after death?

- So far, no one's complained ...

To conclude, the most dangerous and widespread form of egocentrism is the obsession with one's own salvation. Attributing too much importance to oneself is contrary—even opposite—to the ideal of the “laughing saint” that is espoused by the author in this article. A “holy comedian” is a person who is completely detached from his ego as well as his personal intellectual and emotional preferences:

Three pilgrims pray.

The first:

— God, who am I in comparison to you? A weightless piece of dust, unseen by the eye and gone with a wind.

The second:

— Oh, God, how little am I before your might! The smallest, the most insignificant atom, lost in the abyss of space.

The third one:

— Lord, how belittled I am before you! A tiny insect ...

The first man says to the second one:

— Boy, have you seen this one with his delusion of grandeur?!

After all, laughter is the sign of spiritual strength and freedom. It is a form of spiritual practice. We all should imitate our creator, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-wise but who is also the greatest artist and, arguably, the funniest comedian of all:

They say that one minute of laughter makes one's life five minutes longer. Now it becomes clear why after having created life on Earth God lives forever...

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