

Hypocrisy and Humour in the English Reformation

Ethan H. Shagan*

University of California, Berkeley

This article examines jokes about religion, particularly religious hypocrisy, in early modern English jestbooks, from the 1520s to the 1740s. It argues that over the course of England's Long Reformation, we find more and more jokes in which the solution, or alternative, to hypocrisy is not a more robust faith, making the inward heart correspond to one's outward show of religion, but rather a more profane Christianity, making one's outward face correspond to an all-too-human and worldly heart. Jokes about religious hypocrisy thus betray both a deep anxiety about piety, and the emergence of a profane species of Protestantism.

The word 'hypocrisy' comes from a Greek term for stage actors, considered untrustworthy because so adept at impersonation.¹ The early church actually forbade actors, along with prostitutes and gladiators, from becoming Christians unless they abandoned their profession.² More than a thousand years later, as the Christian West fractured into hostile religious factions, putting on a false face came to be seen as the characteristic danger of the early modern age. Accusations of hypocrisy were an intrinsic part of Reformation controversy, not only because the interior condition of the Christian took on a radically new spiritual significance, but because hiding one's true beliefs really did find eloquent new advocates, under the guise of Tacitean 'prudence' or the virtue of

* Department of History, University of California, Berkeley, 3229 Dwinelle Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA. E-mail: shagan@berkeley.edu.

¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary's* entry under 'hypocrisy' says: 'Greek *ὑπόκρισις*, the acting of a part on the stage, feigning, pretence'; and under 'hypocrite': 'Greek *ὑποκριτής* an actor on the stage, pretender, dissembler': 'Hypocrisy, noun' and 'Hypocrite, noun', *OED*, online at: <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/hypocrisy_n?tab=etymology#1051130>, accessed 12 January 2024.

² Augustine, *St. Augustine on Faith and Works*, transl. Gregory Lombardo (New York, 1988), 18.33, p. 41; *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* 16, online at: <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm>>, accessed 12 January 2024.

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‘politeness’.³ Protestants accused Roman Catholics and the seething mass of unregenerate humanity of being, in fact, Christians in name only, while they in turn accused Protestants of demanding a purity in others which they failed to exercise themselves.

This is the typical context in which Reformation historians write about hypocrisy,⁴ it is not the subject of this article. At best, it forms the intellectual backdrop for another subject which is of equal significance for understanding religion in the early modern era, but which historians rarely talk about: humour, particularly the ways that hypocrisy was an occasion for wit and parody, rather than polemic. Humour has always served as a vehicle for interrogating the uncomfortable gap between people’s words and deeds, from the plays of Aristophanes and the satires of Juvenal, to Geoffrey Chaucer’s ‘Pardoner’ trafficking in fake relics, to Martin Marprelate’s scurrilous attacks on English bishops. Like all comedy, humour lampooning hypocrisy sometimes served a serious purpose. But religious humour was not simply divinity in drag, and we should not read it for doctrine, as if we were reading a treatise or a sermon. Theologians might use humour, of course. But just as plausibly, humourists might use theology, and their projects were not necessarily the same.

This is therefore a serious article about jokes. The jestbook, a new genre developed in the Italian Renaissance (although with classical and medieval antecedents), achieved great heights of popularity in early modern England.⁵ Scholars have rarely noticed that, second

³ See, for instance, Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*, transl. David McLintock (Cambridge, 1982); Jenny Davidson, *Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness: Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁴ On early modern England in particular, where ‘puritan’ was often imagined as synonymous with ‘hypocrite’, see, for example, Lucia Nigri and Naya Tsentourou, eds, *Forms of Hypocrisy in Early Modern England* (New York, 2018); Carys Brown, *Friends, Neighbours, Sinners: Religious Difference and English Society, 1689–1750* (Cambridge, 2022), esp. ch. 3 (109–50); Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013). For an excellent recent account of the broader Reformation scene, see Ulinka Rublack, *Reformation Europe*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2017; first publ. 2005).

⁵ Jestbooks have been studied by many literary scholars but few historians: see, for instance, Mark Knights and Adam Morton, eds, *The Power of Laughter and Satire in Early Modern Britain: Political and Religious Culture, 1500–1820* (Woodbridge, 2017); Pamela Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY, 2003); Chris Holcomb, *Mirth Making: The Rhetorical Discourse on Jest in Early Modern England* (Columbia, SC, 2001); George Minois, *Histoire du rire et de la dérision* (Paris, 2000); Don Nilsen, *Humor in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Literature: A Reference Guide* (Westport, CT, 1998); idem,

only to sex, religion saturated early modern jokes, forming a rich mine of sources for the history of religion that lies almost wholly unexcavated. Within this motherlode, one important vein of jokes about religion lampooned hypocrisy: jesters wagged their fingers at supposedly devout and pious Christians who turned out to be worldly and sinful. This is not surprising. But what perhaps is surprising is that, over the course of England's Long Reformation, we find more and more jokes in which the solution, or alternative, to hypocrisy is not a more robust faith, in which the inward heart corresponds to one's outward show of religion, but rather a more profane Christianity, where one's outward face is made to correspond to an all-too-human and worldly heart.

We should not, however, imagine these jokes as prescriptive. People who told jokes about blasphemy did not necessarily want to live in a blasphemous world, any more than men who told endless jokes about cuckoldry approved of their wives' infidelity. If there is anything universal about jokes, it is that they consist in transgression. Nonetheless, in the same way that feminist scholars have used cuckold jokes to explore the contours of male anxiety, an analysis of religious jokes can tell us a great deal about the gathering clouds of religious apprehension.⁶ In at least some jokes about religious hypocrisy, we can observe the lengthening shadows of worries that could not easily be expressed in the kinds of prescriptive sources which ecclesiastical historians typically read: not only that the pious were not as saintly as they claimed, but that piety itself might be something less than what it was cracked up to be. By telling jokes about religious hypocrisy, at least some early modern subjects found ways to accept and accommodate their own profanity, even if that meant laughing at themselves.

Humor in British Literature from the Middle Ages to the Restoration: A Reference Guide (Westport, CT, 1997); Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds, *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), especially the article by Derek Brewer, 'Prose Jest-Books Mainly in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries in England', 90–111; Raymond Anselmet, 'Betwixt Jest and Earnest': *Marpregate, Milton, Marvell, Swift & the Decorum of Religious Ridicule* (Toronto, 1979); Keith Thomas, 'The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England', *The Times Literary Supplement* 21 (1977), 77–81.

⁶ See, for example, Claire McEachern, 'Why do Cuckolds Have Horns?', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 71 (2008), 607–31.

I.

Before proceeding, a few brief introductory comments will help to set the scene. The revived classical genre of the jestbook percolated outwards from Italy with the rest of Renaissance humanism around the end of the fifteenth century. Its most important early exemplar was Poggio Bracciolini's toweringly smutty *Facetiae* (c.1470). The first English jestbook, called *A Hundred Merry Tales*, was published in 1526 and proved popular enough to be mentioned by Shakespeare in *Much Ado about Nothing*, where Beatrice is accused of having acquired her splendid wit 'out of the hundred merry tales'.⁷ A second English jestbook was published soon thereafter in 1532, followed by a long hiatus during the mid-sixteenth century, before returning in the later Elizabethan period. Throughout Europe, and in England too, jestbooks gradually evolved, riding the market for print more broadly, from demonstrations of humanist wit to genuinely popular works aimed at a broad audience.⁸

Jestbooks are only one aspect of a mountain of humorous sources from early modern England, many of which, like Samuel Butler's anti-puritan masterpiece *Hudibras* (first published 1663), made hypocrisy their cornerstone. But jestbooks were, even more so than most early modern humour, generally boorish and obscene. Despite occasional efforts to wrap bawdy jokes in moralizing clothes, there was simply no getting around their indecent content. In *A Hundred Merry Tales*, for instance, we hear of a pubescent gentleman who has grown hair only on his lip but not yet on his chin. A gentlewoman says to him: 'Sir, ye have a beard above and none beneath'; to which he replies, 'Mistress, ye have a beard beneath and none above.' 'Marry, quod she, then set the one against the other. Which answer made the gentleman so abashed that he had not one word to answer.'⁹ Despite Robert Darnton's famous dictum that the key to unlocking past mentalities is in what they found funny but we do not, with these

⁷ Ian Munro, 'Shakespeare's Jestbook: Wit, Print, Performance', *ELH* 71 (2004), 89–113, at 89.

⁸ As late as the middle of the seventeenth century, there is evidence of gentlemen making their own manuscript jestbooks, compiling material they had read and heard in order to demonstrate their wit. See, for instance, the manuscript jestbook of Sir Nicholas Le Strange (1603–55), published in a modern edition as Nicholas Le Strange, *Merry Passages and Jeasts: A Manuscript Jestbook*, ed. H. F. Lippincott (Salzburg, 1974).

⁹ *A C Mery Talys* (London, 1526), fol. 8^v.

jokes there is generally no need: despite obsolete topicality and archaic expression, most of this material, for good or ill, is familiar rather than alien, still funny if you are the kind of person who finds that kind of thing funny.¹⁰

We should not underestimate the complexity and difficulty of using jestbooks as historical sources. One obvious problem is their lack of originality, and hence historical specificity: these books sometimes read like vast accretions of plagiarism held together by thin tissues of novelty. Jokes were recycled from generation to generation, an expanding hoard, rather than a series of discreet cultural moments. Many jokes had classical or continental sources, meaning they only obliquely reflect English conditions. For instance, *Wits Fittes and Fancies* (1595), by the English Roman Catholic poet Anthony Copley, is partially compiled from *La Floresta Española* (1574), whose Spanish jokes then passed into common English usage in dozens of other jestbooks.¹¹ Compounding the problem of provenance is the fact that many jokes were packaged and marketed under the names of famous, but safely dead celebrities, such as Queen Elizabeth's clown Richard Tarleton (sometimes identified as the model for Shakespeare's Yorick, that fellow of infinite jest), or Archy Armstrong, jester to James VI/I and then Charles I, until an ill-timed jibe at Archbishop Laud about the Scottish National Covenant saw him banished from court.¹² In the eighteenth century, so many jestbooks purported to contain jokes by the actor Joe Miller – friend to the artist William Hogarth, famous for his portrayal of Hamlet's gravedigger – that jokes themselves became known as 'Millerisms', even though it appears unlikely that Miller wrote virtually any of them.

Jokes, therefore, do not make a simple source for historians: they speak in no distinct voice and reflect no distinct opinions. Yet few good sources are simple, and while recycling undoubtedly occurred, its impact should not be overestimated. Novelty sold jestbooks, as did topicality, and a systematic reading of these books from the early sixteenth century to the early eighteenth reveals a process of

¹⁰ Robert Darnton, 'Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin', in idem, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1985), 75–104.

¹¹ Anthony Copley, *Wits Fittes and Fancies* (London, 1595).

¹² See Andrea Shannon, "'Uncouth Language to a Princes Ears': Archibald Armstrong, Court Jester, and Early Stuart Politics', *SCJ* 42 (2011), 99–112.

transformation. Individual authors curated their works, increasingly appealing to a popular market. New jokes were constantly added. Some were successful and thus entered the repertoire; others failed and were never heard of again; still others were topical, living short, glorious lives before their relevance waned. Over the course of centuries, old jokes were tweaked, or sometimes boldly recast, to remain popular. Hence, while we cannot simply pick up a jestbook and assume that its contents reflect the conditions of its date of publication, in the aggregate, we can track trends and notice novelty arising out of convention.

These preliminaries established, we can now jump into the jestbooks themselves. If we begin synchronically, taking early modern jokes as a whole, we can broadly organize jokes about religion into three undoubtedly overlapping, but conceptually distinct categories. First, there are jokes that poke fun at ignorance and irreligion, at all those ostensible Christians who have not the slightest inkling of Christianity, and therefore unintentionally say or do funny things. Sometimes, these jokes take as their stock character the ignorant priest, the country yokel or the foppish gentleman. Sometimes, they employ the misogynist trope of the ignorant peasant woman. To give a few examples, there is an oft-repeated joke about two gentlemen who do not know which holiday they are celebrating, but decide it is probably the day of our blessed lady's circumcision.¹³ In a joke with many variants, a minister asks an old man if he knows 'who made him', but the old man cannot answer. The minister tells him it is shameful he should be so ignorant, when a young child knows the answer. The man replies: 'He is but newly made, and may well remember it, but four score years are past since I was made.'¹⁴ In another joke:

An ignorant old woman in the country, hearing a minister preach on the passion of Christ, of the cruel and barbarous death that the Jews put him to, wept grievously. And when the minister had done, she came to him and asked him how long ago it was since this sad thing was done? The minister told her it was sixteen hundred years since. *O then, says*

¹³ Anon., *A Banquet of Jestes: Or, a Collection of Court, Camp, Colledge, Citie, Country Iests, In Two Bookes. The Sixth Edition, much enlarged for the delight of the reader* (London, 1640), 54.

¹⁴ A. S. Gent. [Robert Chamberlain?], 'The Two Last Centuries of Bulls, Iests and Lies', in *The Booke of Bulls* (London, 1636), 11.

the woman, being a little revived, *if it be so long ago, I hope in God it may not be true.*¹⁵

A second category consists of jokes that make fun of doctrinal or confessional opponents. One joke, introduced just before the English Civil War, mocked the absurdity of puritanism. ‘Some Cambridge scholars reasoning together, one of them would have the word “mass” never once named.’ That is, instead of Christmas, there would be Christ-tide; instead of Michaelmas, there would be Michael-tide, and so forth. But one of the company objected: ‘For, said he, my name is Thomas, so is many an honest man’s more, and why, for what reason, should we be called Tom-tides?’¹⁶ Sometimes, these jokes could be clever and sophisticated. In one jestbook, written by an English Roman Catholic, a country parson preaches to his parishioners that we are saved not by Peter or Paul, ‘but by God’s blood only’. The parishioners respond by telling him not to swear. He repeats: ‘Nay, by God’s death then you are all to be saved and no[t] otherwise’; and again they answer: ‘O swear not.’ This dynamic repeats itself several more times, making comedy of the fact that phrases such as ‘by God’s blood’ and ‘by God’s death’ are pious pronouncements in the mouth of a Protestant preacher, but in the ears of his parishioners are the impious oaths which he had forbidden them from uttering.¹⁷ Less subtly, a 1638 joke described a Jesuit administering the sacrament to a sick Roman Catholic, saying: ‘Take, eat, this is Christ’s body’; the sick man ‘answered him that it stood against his conscience to eat flesh on a Friday’.¹⁸ Another joke from 1674 finds a Protestant and a Roman Catholic in Paris, arguing about the pope’s infallibility: ‘The priest said that the pope may err as a man but not as a pope; I would fain know (said the gentleman) why the pope doth not instruct or reform the man?’¹⁹

Most of these jokes were surprisingly gentle. Jestbooks were not polemical and tended to take a light touch when it came to confessional differences. Of course, we should not forget that words carry weight, and that even the softest jokes at the expense of persecuted

¹⁵ Humphrey Crouch, *England’s Jestes Refin’d and Improv’d* (London, 1693), 52–3 (no. 102). Italics original.

¹⁶ Anon., *A Banquet of Jestes*, 126–7.

¹⁷ Copley, *Wits Fittes and Fancies*, 156.

¹⁸ H. L. Oxon., *Gratiae Ludentes: Iests, from the Universitie* (London, 1638), 52–3.

¹⁹ Anon., *The Complaisant Companion, or New Jestes* (London, 1674), 19.

minorities still land blows. But given the reality of so much hatred and violence in the early modern era, many of these jokes were almost friendly by comparison, and might possibly have released tension rather than adding to it. In this context, it is noteworthy that many anti-Catholic jokes in English jestbooks were actually adapted from continental Renaissance antecedents: these were actually pre-Reformation jokes in which Roman Catholics had made fun of one another, now tweaked by Protestants, but not invented by them.

A third category consists of jokes making fun of hypocrisy. Naturally, these jokes focused on the sins of the supposedly devout, especially puritans and Roman Catholics, but sometimes of simple people in general. Since sex is always the most common subject of humour, these jokes tended to harp on sexual sins. Thus a man 'who had lain with his female servant', the next day catechized her as usual, asking her how many commandments there were. 'She answered nine. Thou Fool, quoth he, hast thou lived to this age, and knowest no better? There are ten. *I know*, says she, *very well, there were ten yesterday; but you and I broke one of them the last night, so that there are but nine of them left.*'²⁰ In another joke, a man sees the married 'Mistress Temperance' – obviously a puritan by her name – and swears he will lie with her. She acts offended, but then says: 'but that I am tender of oaths, and would be loath to have you break yours, for the oath's sake I am willing to consent to you at present'.²¹ The 1677 book that included this joke, *Coffee House Jestes*, by the former Royalist William Hicks, was filled with mockery of puritan hypocrisy in particular. For instance, 'A fanatic did lately extremely exclaim against the surplice in the church, but a little after he was catch'd a-bed with one of his holy sisters; and in the same place where he would not have a surplice worn, he poor heart was forc'd there to wear a sheet' (that is, the white cloth worn for public penance).²²

Sex was far from the only arena in which words and deeds might diverge. Consider the following joke:

A priest in an abbey being a fisherman's son, was used every meal to have a net laid on the table instead of a tablecloth in token of humility,

²⁰ Crouch, *England's Jestes Refin'd and Improv'd*, 66 (no. 128). Italics original.

²¹ [William Hicks], *Coffee-House Jestes: By the Author of the Oxford-Jestes* (London, 1677), 42 (no. 71).

²² [Hicks], *Coffee-House Jestes*, 45 (no. 77).

and to remember from whence he came; but the abbot dying, for his pretended humility's sake he was elected abbot, and then the net was not laid on the table as before, and being asked the reason, told 'em, *I have that which I fished for, I have no need of the net now.*²³

A joke printed in 1679, offers a satire of conformity:

An old doctor, which had been a Protestant in King Edward's days, a papist in Queen Mary's days, and a Protestant again in Queen Elizabeth's, seeing a lady dance a galliard, commended her dance very much. To which she answered, that *She knew she danced well enough, only she could not turn so well as he.*²⁴

Or consider a joke called 'Of a puritan's kneeling to the king's health', from a 1636 jestbook entitled the *Book of Bulls*: 'A certain major at his table began the king's health on his knee, on purpose to fetch a puritan alderman down to his.' That is, he was trying to trap the puritan in disloyalty to the king, since puritans sometimes considered kneeling a form of idolatry. 'The puritan, contrary to all men's expectation, pledged it on both knees, and the major demanding the reason why he kneeled down on both knees, he answered, that he kneeled on one in honor of the king, and on the other to ask God forgiveness for so doing.'²⁵ Another joke in the same book finds a 'distracted schismatical fellow', in other words a puritan, in Rome. When he sees the pope ride by, he shouts at him: 'Thou art the antichrist!' Naturally, he is arrested, convicted of heresy and brought to the stake to be burned. At which point, inevitably, he makes a complete retraction, saying 'that he was resolved to die till he saw the fire, which much terrified him; for, said he, I came into the world a poor raw thing, and would be loath to go out roasted.'²⁶

Taking these three different categories of jokes together, the first thing to note is that we can describe them all as conventionally pious. That is, they criticize things that ought to be criticized, according to orthodox religious authorities of one stripe or another. Those

²³ William Hicks, *Oxford Jestes, Refined and Enlarged: Being a Collection of Witty Jestes, Merry Tales, Pleasant Joques* (London, 1671), 162 (no. 550). Italics original.

²⁴ Democritus Junior, *Versatile Ingenium, the Wittie Companion, or Jestes of All Sorts* (London, 1679), 39 (no. 13). Italics original.

²⁵ A. S. Gent. [Robert Chamberlain?], *The Booke of Bulls, Baited with two Centuries of Bold Jestes, and nimble-lies* (London, 1636), part 2, 69–70.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 59–61.

authorities might not necessarily appreciate the medium of criticism, since humour itself had a complex theological history. One strain of Christianity, running from John Chrysostom through Benedict of Nursia, and on to some of the English puritans, condemned laughter almost without exception. This was the strain so memorably fictionalized in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. But for most Christians, it was unproblematic that ignorance, error and hypocrisy might be laughed at; hence jokes which made fun of ignorance, error and hypocrisy could proudly wear the mantle of orthodoxy.

The second thing to note is that the third category, those jokes which make fun of hypocrisy in particular, were not as conventionally pious as they at first glance appear. In principle, in order to make fun of hypocrites, you yourself have to be sincere, with your heart and words aligning, in the same way that, in order to make fun of error, you yourself have to be orthodox. But in fact, the superficial piety of these jokes about hypocrisy is overtly, gloriously insincere, because they are found in jestbooks which also, almost without exception, traffic in indecency, gleefully offending the morals of pious readers.

Take the joke about the 'Nine Commandments', which ostensibly condemns a gentleman for the hypocrisy of catechizing his servant about God's law the morning after he has slept with her. This joke is found in Humphrey Crouch's *England's Jestes Refined and Improved* (published with slight variations in 1687 and 1693) which insisted in its preface that its jokes were harmless entertainment, which 'do not interfere with religion or good manners'.²⁷ That claim was not easy to square with a joke such as the following:

A gentleman riding on the road, overtook a young brisk country lass, who after some time travelling together, consented to his amours; the man being conscious of what he had done, and how prejudicial it might prove to the maid, told her, if anything came of their endeavours, she should hear of him at a certain place in London. *'Tis no matter Sir,* said she, *I am to be married on Monday.*²⁸

Or take the *Oxford Jestes* (1671) from which is drawn the joke about the false humility of the priest who used fishing nets as tablecloths, as well as the joke about Mistress Temperance being tender of oaths.

²⁷ Crouch, *England's Jestes Refin'd and Improv'd*, preface, sig. A3^v.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 52 (no. 101). Italics original.

Oxford Jests also included a joke about ‘some naked boys at Norton’, who ‘clapped some clay upon the hole of every boy’s bum; a wench being among them, being to be clapped upon her bum also; one said, Hey ding! Here’s a boy has two holes, give me two pieces of dirt’.²⁹ Surely no pious Christians in the seventeenth century would have approved of the transgressive profanity of these jokes.

Virtually all jokes about religious hypocrisy were thus themselves hypocritical. With a wink and a nod to readers, jestbooks knowingly adopted a holier-than-thou attitude in order to poke fun at the holier-than-thou, all the while positively revelling in the fact that they were not holy at all, and that the mere act of reading them subverted the supposed piety that authorized jokes about religious hypocrisy in the first place. This was less a matter of authorial or editorial intent, than a generic feature of the jestbooks themselves, where ostensibly religious material mingled with content that ranged from merely irreverent to blatantly smutty.

This is why it is crucially important that we not read religious jokes as polemic by other means, and that we not abstract these jokes from their literary context. In the form of their production and consumption, jokes which mocked religious hypocrisy were double-edged and rhetorically ambiguous, hiding a kind of obstreperous insubordination within the folds of their seeming piety.

II.

Having identified this strain of meta-hypocrisy as a generic feature of jestbooks, we can notice another feature: crossover jokes which might be placed in more than one of our notional categories. Of course, some jokes were both about doctrinal difference and about hypocrisy; while others were about the ignorance of confessional opponents. But most importantly, there was a variant of jokes from the first category – making fun of ignorant or irreligious people – which also raised the spectre of hypocrisy. In this variant, ignorant or irreligious people are made objects of ridicule, but in the process, those ignorant or irreligious people call out and expose overblown, sanctimonious or hypocritical holiness in others. In other words, the satire of these jokes falls, like rain, on both the just and the unjust. We are asked not only to

²⁹ Hicks, *Oxford Jests*, 44 (no. 174).

laugh *at* impiety, but also to laugh *with* impiety, because at least that impiety is honest and sincere.

Perhaps the earliest joke that fits this description comes from the 1532 *Tales and Quicke Answers*, the second jestbook to be printed in England. In this joke, a friar announces in his sermon what an honourable charge St Christopher had, to bear our saviour in his arms; this was a reference to the legend that St Christopher had carried a child across a river, who turned out to be Jesus, which is why Christopher became the patron saint of travellers. ‘Was there ever any like him in grace?’, the friar asks rhetorically. To which a ‘homely, blunt fellow’ responds that, yes, there was: ‘the ass that bore both him and his mother.’³⁰ Notice the productive ambiguity in this joke. If you wanted to, you could interpret it as mocking the ‘homely, blunt fellow’ and yokels like him, who misinterpret religion by taking it carnally, rather than spiritually. But just as easily, you could interpret it as mocking the pompous friar’s insincerity or ridiculousness. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive: it is the possibility of the first meaning that authorizes the joke and renders it orthodox, thereby making the second meaning available to readers, who are clearly meant to identify, not with the friar, but with the ‘homely, blunt fellow’ and to find wisdom in his worldliness. We could also dig more deeply into the theology of this joke. For instance, its mocking of saints’ legends is reminiscent of Erasmus, and there are other jokes in the same jestbook borrowed from Erasmus, Poggio Bracciolini and other humanist sources. We could thus choose to imagine this joke as a contribution to the *philosophia Christi*, Erasmus’s conception of faith-centred piety. But we do not have to. By mocking the friar’s piety without offering any clearly pious alternative, the joke might be taken to relegate piety itself to the sidelines. That is the kind of joke we must now consider.

It is hard to make chronological arguments about jestbooks because of their constant recycling. Nonetheless, while it would be difficult to prove systematically, there is no doubt that, broadly, while there were occasional early examples, this type of joke became increasingly common over the course of this period, as jestbooks themselves became genuinely mass media, written less as humanist rhetorical exercises and more for an increasingly popular audience.

³⁰ Anon., *Tales and quicke answers, very mery, and pleasant to rede* (London, 1532), sig. A1^r (no. 2).

By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, we find more and more jokes about religion which seem ready to embrace a kind of honest worldliness, asking us to laugh alongside the kinds of inveterate yokels who feature as figures of opprobrium in so many puritan attacks on popular culture. In *A Choice Banquet of Witty Jestes* (1660), we find the first iteration of a joke about the Christian legend of St George, ‘how he killed the dragon that would else have devoured the maid’. A man who heard the story wondered aloud that men would devise such lies, for ‘it is held by most men, that there was never such a man as St. George, nor such a creature as a dragon’. His companion answered that, on the contrary, it was easy to believe in both the saint and the dragon, but whether there was really a maid was another matter.³¹ In the same book, we learn that ‘certain country clowns’ are too familiar with their ministers, not calling them by their proper titles. One of these bumpkins is told by ‘one of the more knowing amongst them’ that he ought to address his minister as ‘Pastor ... because, saith he, Pastor is as much as shepherd, or the head of sheep’. Thereafter, the bumpkin addresses his minister as ‘Master Sheep’s head’.³²

In one joke from the 1671 *Oxford Jestes*, a priest tells a condemned felon about to be executed ‘that though his dinner was sharp and harsh, yet he should find a joyful supper in heaven’. This is the traditional language of early modern piety; Charles I had said something similar before walking to the scaffold. ‘Ah, says he, ’twill do me no good, for I never eat any suppers.’³³ In another example, a woman confesses to a friar that her chief sin is lying with men. ‘Well, says the friar, whoredom is a thing which doth much displease God. Faith, says she, I am sorry for that, for I am sure it pleased me.’³⁴ In these jokes, it is not clear whether the priests are mocked for their pomposity in general, or for their hypocrisy in particular; we shall return to this question below. As in the joke about St Christopher, the point is that sinners give the pious their comeuppance, even though those sinners are ostensibly the ones being mocked.

³¹ Anon., *A Choice Banquet of Witty Jestes* (London, 1660), 15 (no. 46).

³² *Ibid.* 137 (no. 374).

³³ Hicks, *Oxford Jestes*, 14 (no. 60).

³⁴ *Ibid.* 63 (no. 237).

More examples can be found in *The Complaisant Companion* (1674), published anonymously, but probably written by Richard Head. In one joke, 'A country parson having bitterly inveighed against the vices of his parishioners in his sermon, a silly woman that was present went to his mother ... to complain of him, saying that her son had threatened them all with hell and damnation if they did not speedily amend.' 'O, said his mother, he was a liar from his cradle, I never whipped him but for telling an untruth, and you are mad if you believe him now.'³⁵

The culmination of this trend came in a series of jestbooks published in the 1720s and 1730s. One good example is *Polly Peachum's Jest*s from 1728, among the most popular new jestbooks of the eighteenth century, which shamelessly stole its title from one of the characters in John Gay's recently-released smash hit *The Beggar's Opera*. In one of Polly Peachum's jokes, 'A melting sermon being preached in a country church, all fell a weeping but one man; who being asked why he did not weep with the rest: O! said he, I belong to another parish.'³⁶ This is a perfect example of the kind of joke we are considering. It remains ostensibly orthodox, because its target can be taken to be the man from another parish who cares not a fig for sermons; yet at the same time, the author is rolling his eyes at the absurdity of these pious churchgoers and their minister who claim, literally in this case, to be holier-than-thou. Another joke describes a servant to the chaplain on a naval ship, who asks a servant on another ship how often he went to prayers. The other servant answers, 'in case of a storm or danger'. 'Ah, said the first, there's some sense in that, but my master makes us pray when there is no more occasion for it than for my leaping overboard.'³⁷ There is another example concerning 'a certain reverend drone in the country' – that is, a pious preacher – who complains to another 'that it was a great fatigue to preach twice a day'. 'Oh, said the other, I preach twice every Sunday and *make nothing of it*.' Or yet another on 'A parson preaching a tiresome sermon on happiness or bliss; when he had done a gentleman told him he had forgot one sort of happiness, *Happy are they that did not hear your sermon*.'³⁸ No kind of religion

³⁵ Anon., *Complaisant Companion*, 77.

³⁶ Anon., *Polly Peachum's Jest*s (London, 1728), 41 (no. 110).

³⁷ *Ibid.* 20 (no. 49).

³⁸ *Ibid.* 3 (no. 6) and 30 (no. 78). Italics original.

can escape these mockeries, because the ‘reverend drones’ and their holier-than-thou followers are no more or less objects of mirth than the irreverent wits who mock them.

Let us consider another jestbook called *England’s Genius: Or, Wit Triumphant* (1734). A ‘country wench’, jostling through the aisle of St Clement’s Church to get closer to the pulpit, accidentally pushes an elderly woman. The girl apologizes, saying she only wanted to get near enough to hear. ‘To hear?’, replies the old woman incredulously, ‘Why, thou bold baggage, I have sat here these thirty years and never heard a word the parson said in all that time.’³⁹ Who is being laughed at here, the irreligious woman, the pious girl or the preacher who is never heard? Surely all of them at once. Or for another example: ‘A drunken rake, that made it his constant practice to lie in bed every Sunday, was sharply reprimanded for it by a clergyman.’ He answered, ‘that he was sorry a person of the sacred function understood the scriptures no better, when the Sabbath was appointed for a day of rest’.⁴⁰

It is worth pausing here for a moment to consider the ecclesio-political orientation of these jokes. We must be cautious in making this assessment, because the editorial slant of jestbooks is always muddy, and looking for consistency is a fool’s errand. Nonetheless, rough sensibilities can often be gleaned, and in general, unsurprisingly, we find these jokes predominantly in jestbooks that were broadly anti-puritan. One jestbook that specialized in this kind of joke was the 1671 *Oxford Jest*s by William Hicks, a proud purveyor of lowbrow humour (‘Oxford’ for the town, not the gown), known as Captain Hicks for his royalism during the English Civil War. Another example is *The Complaisant Companion* (1674), probably written by Richard Head, author of *The English Rogue* (1665) among other, sometimes indecent, adventures. *A Choice Banquet of Witty Jest*s (1660) was one of several jestbooks in which famous Parliamentarians from the Civil War, such as the army chaplain Hugh Peters, appeared as clowns like the stock figures of *commedia dell’arte*.⁴¹

³⁹ Anon., *England’s Genius: Or, Wit Triumphant* (London, 1734), 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 35.

⁴¹ This is a fascinating phenomenon. Elsewhere, Peters is demoted to ‘a kind of buffoon jester to Oliver Cromwell’: [J. S.], *England’s Merry Jester: or, Court, City and Country Jest*s (London, 1693), 13 (no. 16). Whole jestbooks, *The Tales and Jest*s of Mr Hugh Peters (London, 1660) and *Hugh Peters Figaries* (London, 1660), used Peters as a comic

It seems, then, that jokes which mocked the pious and impious together are most often found in jestbooks which were broadly anti-puritan. This observation, however, is not actually very helpful and, analytically, it does not get us very far. In one sense, it is simply trivial, because, Martin Marprelate notwithstanding, there was no such thing as a puritan jestbook: of course indecent humour was anti-puritan. But it is also a red herring for another reason: even if they were against puritans, it is not clear what ecclesio-political 'side' these jokes were supposed to be for. There was no pro-impimpiety party in early modern England, no 'Church of Staying Home in Bed'. The appreciation shown in these jestbooks for blunt goodfellows might have made them in some sense culturally 'Anglican' (as we may start to call a certain kind of Church of England sensibility in the decades after 1660), but they were plainly as offensive to Church of England and especially to high church religious ideals as they were to puritan ones. Again, we must resist the urge to imagine jokes about religion as somehow practising divinity without a licence; instead of asserting a stark religious position, the assertion of stark religious positions was part of what they were laughing at. Or, to put it differently, it is not the case that there was somehow a market for Anglican jokes; instead there was a Church of England market for jokes which were broadly impious.

With that observation, we can now return to the issue of hypocrisy, which is analytically helpful and gets us much further. In some of the jokes making fun of the pious and impious together, hypocrisy is very obviously at stake. But in others, hypocrisy is left implicit and has to be assumed or deduced by the reader. It is implicit rather than absent, because the honest simplicity of the impious sinner is clearly highlighted: what had been derided earlier as ignorance now feels more like plain-dealing authenticity, and that authenticity is presumably being contrasted with something. Readers might reasonably connect the dots and imagine that the antithesis of honest authenticity is hypocrisy, which would explain, in a theologically palatable way, why the pious deserve to be laughed at just as much as the blunt goodfellow. On the other hand, it is also possible that the pious are simply pious, and that in these jokes it is no

character. For more on this, see Arnold Hunt, *Protestant Bodies: Gesture in the English Reformation* (Cambridge, forthcoming 2024), which I was privileged to read in draft.

more or less than their piety which is being laughed at. The minister who complains about the drunk sleeping in on Sundays is a blowhard, and we are invited to laugh at him. But is he a blowhard because he is no less a sinner than his hungover parishioner, or is he a blowhard because he should just mind his own business? The jestbook does not answer this question and, again, we must appreciate what a productive ambiguity this is. By hinting that seemingly pious men and women are hypocrites, these jokes preserve for themselves a kind of orthodoxy: the assumption that it is always allowable to laugh at hypocrites. But they also open up the more subversive possibility that all piety is in some sense hypocritical, or even worse, that piety is *ipso facto* ridiculous, whether sincere or not.

This movement finds its epitome in a joke in the 1742 *Ecclesiastical Transactions: Or, a Collection of Reverend Jokes*, a weird and derivative hybrid, but nonetheless the first and perhaps only English jestbook wholly focused on religion. There, a gentleman (the judge and MP Joseph Jekyll, safely dead by 1742) worriedly tells his secretary, described as ‘an honest, inoffensive, though not an over-religious man’, that he never sees him in church. ‘No, replied the other, I seldom go; not that I think there is any harm in it neither.’⁴² The existence of this joke, looked at from an early modern perspective, is downright shocking. By 1742, it was evidently possible to imagine that going to church, as much as not going to church, was laughable. One possible reason why, overtly if quietly signalled, is hypocrisy: it is the ‘honest’ man who does not go, and the joke implies that there is something dishonest about being ‘over-religious’. But another possibility, left wide open, is that churchgoing is simply a waste of time. The joke dances on the edge of this freethinking anti-Christianity, but retreats back into a plausibly Christian critique of hypocrisy with two centuries of respectable pedigree behind it.

III.

To understand what was at stake in this emerging deployment of hypocrisy, let us turn to one final anecdote, this time not from a jestbook, but from a conventionally pious cleric. In 1530, a monk of Syon Abbey named Richard Whitford, England’s bestselling

⁴² Anon., *Ecclesiastical Transactions: Or, a Collection of Reverend Jokes* (London, 1742), 8.

devotional author, warned his readers that piety would look ridiculous in the eyes of the world. When he recommended intensive daily devotions for all his readers, Whitford noted: ‘Some of you will say, “Sir, this work is good for religious persons ... [but] if we should use these things in presence of our fellows, some would laugh us to scorn and mock us.”’⁴³ Whitford’s point was not that piety would be laughed at because it was somehow misguided or wrong. There is no hint of heterodoxy or freethinking here; Whitford’s imaginary goodfellows are no less Christian than he is. Instead, the rabble laugh at piety because it is so alien to the world, allowable for monks, but outrageous in the laity.

This suggestion corresponds to the views of the philosopher John Morreall, whose 1983 book, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, delineated three principal theories of laughter.⁴⁴ First is the superiority theory, where humour is a kind of aggression to establish dominance; this is what Robert Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), called ‘bitter jests’.⁴⁵ Second is the relief theory, in which laughter eases tensions and avoids catastrophes that might result from more serious responses; this is the safety-valve principle, made famous to early modernists by Mikhail Bakhtin in his classic *Rabelais and His World*.⁴⁶ Third is the incongruity theory, where laughter results from an irruption of the unexpected, illogical or inappropriate; as Blaise Pascal put it: ‘nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees.’⁴⁷ Studies of religion, to the extent that they take laughter seriously, have generally privileged the first and the second versions: ‘relief’ paradigmatically describes the long tradition of carnivalesque inversion, while ‘superiority’ describes the more savage satire of Reformation controversy. Early modern jokes about religion, however, increasingly drew their humour from ‘incongruity’: the failure of religion to fit into the social world.

This failure was obviously not new; saints had been laughed at in antiquity as well. But it intensified with the great new movements of

⁴³ Richard Whitford, *A Werk for Housholders* (London, 1530), sig. B1^v. I owe this reference to Peter Marshall: see also his *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation* (New Haven, CT, 2017), 60.

⁴⁴ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, NY, 1983).

⁴⁵ Democritus Junior [Robert Burton], *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford, 1621), 196.

⁴⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA, 1968).

⁴⁷ Cited in Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 16.

lay piety that characterized the later Middle Ages. After all, the oddity which generated laughter in Whitford's anecdote was the fact that lay-people were now supposed to act like monks, breaking down the division of labour (and piety) that had usually prevented religion from spilling into the profane world. It exploded into prominence with the Reformation, which shattered the partition wall dividing the monastery from the world and attempted to sanctify virtually every aspect of social life. In this environment, a new world of jokes about religion unfolded, in which the quintessential anti-hypocrites were not pious professors who lived a life of self-examination and repentance, but the punters in the pews, straight shooters who did not pretend to be any more or less than ordinary people.

But there was a problem. Having determined that deeply pious and otherworldly religion was funny because of its incongruity with mundane social reality, one was left instead with a religion that was not deeply pious or otherworldly. This, however, was precisely the kind of religion that had been lampooned for centuries as humorous because of its failure to live up to Christian ideals. Nothing was left over; there was no third possibility. Once it was conceded that religion was ludicrous, whether it succeeded or failed, then the line between a religious joke and an irreligious joke started to disappear: there was no religious position left to inhabit that was not rightfully the object of humour. The accusation of religious hypocrisy therefore became a kind of safety valve of its own, a way for these jesters to maintain an authentically Christian position, even while expanding the realm of the laughable to include wide swathes of conventional Christianity. We are all hypocrites when we practise religion, these jokes seem to say; whether we choose to put on a face and practise it nonetheless, or whether we choose to sleep in on Sundays, the important thing is that we are able to laugh at ourselves.

This gleeful irreverence was still, in its own way, an expression of Christianity, operating in a different register, and employing the concept of hypocrisy very differently than we would ever find expressed in formal Reformation controversy. To emphasize the incongruity between religion and the world was, on the one hand, wholly orthodox. To admit that we are all hypocrites, going through the motions of religion in the hope that grace will catch us in the act and make our pantomime real, was orthodox as well. Both positions were broadly Augustinian and very Protestant, albeit Protestant in a rough-and-ready, non-evangelical sort of way. But the difference between the

view from the pulpit and the view from the jestbooks was the difference between apologizing for this incongruity between religion and the world, and laughing at it. To the limited extent that there was a kind of unrefined *lumpen* theology at stake in these jokes, it allowed for religion without repentance, leaving the hard part to God. This position was never quite celebrated as a good idea; after all, it is the butt of these jokes. Yet nor was it any worse than hypocritically believing one's self capable of sainthood. The result was a kind of profane Protestantism, authentic but always a bit ridiculous.

This is why it is so important for historians of religion to read jokes. Profane Protestantism, if I may coin an oxymoronic expression, is certainly known to historians. It is the subject of a great deal of scholarship on festive popular culture: maypoles, church ales, Sunday sports, and the like.⁴⁸ One particularly important work in this tradition is Christopher Haigh's *The Plainman's Pathways to Heaven: Kinds of Christianity in Post-Reformation England* (2007), which rather brilliantly analyzes the subject-positions inhabited by unlearned rustics and boisterous delinquents in the face of pressure from the emerging ecclesiastical state, showing how attitudes which puritans attacked as atheism were subjectively their own brands of religion.⁴⁹ However, this scholarship tends to paint profane Protestantism as an ecclesiastical position, a proto-denomination, an alternative but parallel set of religious beliefs and practices constructed out of the same stuff as Lutheranism or Calvinism.⁵⁰ Jokes about religious hypocrisy, by contrast, allow us to see how different profane Protestantism was, because from within this subject-position, the opposite of hypocrisy was not always or necessarily an alternative piety. They suggest how painfully difficult it must have been for the producers and consumers of these jokes to resolve themselves into a self-conscious and confident ecclesiastical position. These jokes reveal a real precarity, an anxiety inherent in profane Protestantism, an awareness of being on the outside of English Christianity looking

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, CT, 1992); Christopher Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England* (New York, 1998).

⁴⁹ Christopher Haigh, *The Plain Man's Pathways to Heaven: Kinds of Christianity in Post-Reformation England 1570–1640* (Oxford, 2007).

⁵⁰ See especially Judith Maltby, *Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1998).

in. In works of ‘Anglican’ divinity, there is a bold attempt to paint traditionalism as the authentic Christianity of the people; but the jokes reveal a more fraught world where the authentic Christianity of the people is not so very Christian after all, even if it is embraced anyway.

To put this slightly differently, scholarship which has taken profane Protestantism in England seriously has tended to see it as a step on the path to modern Anglicanism. The evidence from jokes suggests that we might do better to see it as part of a long process whereby the confessional divisions of the Long Reformation lost their hold on the imaginations of English people and gradually ceased to organize their mental worlds. The concept of ‘secularization’ is intensely fraught in the historiography; even among historians willing to use the term, it has been located everywhere from the Reformation to the late twentieth century.⁵¹ The evidence presented here has not been sufficient to the task of re-evaluating this important concept. But minimally, jokes about the hypocrisy of piety reflect the emergence of new ways of thinking about humanity’s relationship to the sacred which earlier generations would not have recognized as religious at all. Perhaps the joke was on them.

⁵¹ See C. John Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith* (New York, 1992); Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (New York, 2001).