The value of jokes in Jewish-Christian dialogue

Have you heard the one about the priest, the minister, and the rabbi?

by Joel Kaminsky in the February 9, 2022 issue

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A rabbi and a priest were talking about the perks of each job. The priest mentioned that he gets a rectory to live in that comes with a housekeeper and a cook, all paid for by the church. The rabbi responded by asking if the priest could ever be promoted.

The priest said, "Well, yes, I could be asked to become the archbishop of a larger metro area like Chicago or New York."

"Is that as high as you can go?" asked the rabbi.

The priest replied, "Well, I could be invited to go to Rome to serve as a cardinal."

"Is that the end of the line?" the rabbi queried.

The priest mused, “Well, it’s incredibly rare, but I, a humble parish priest, could become the pope, the head of the worldwide Catholic Church.”

The rabbi asked yet once more, “Is that as high as you can go?”

“What are you expecting, for me to become God?” the priest responded indignantly.

The rabbi replied, “Well, why not, one of our boys made it.”

In my long involvement in Jewish-Christian dialogue, I’ve observed that humor has been useful to express how Jews and Christians perceive one another’s religion and its adherents. I once told this joke to a Catholic middle school class in response to a student query about how Jews view Jesus. The joke answered the question and got some laughs.

But afterward the Catholic sister leading class noted that the joke misrepresented the Christian view of Jesus: Christians, she said, see Jesus not as a man who was apotheosized and became God but as God who took on a human form. I had never fully grasped this point until I told this joke in a Catholic context and received some gentle pushback. Telling it helped at least one Jew understand how Jews and Christians can look at a theological claim in such distinct ways that they may be talking past each other without realizing it.

My suspicion is that we often talk past each other because certain religious ideas and terms we appear to hold in common in fact have distinct meanings in each faith tradition. Thus orthodox Christians understand Jesus as the promised Messiah but also as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob incarnate. Traditional Judaism continues to affirm the idea that a Davidic messiah will eventually rule over a restored people of Israel living in the land of Israel. This messiah may perform miraculous deeds and usher in an age of peace and prosperity. Drawing on Psalm 2, Jews might even think of him figuratively as the adopted son of God. But he is just a human being, not God incarnate. Frequently Jews and Christians are both united and divided by biblical concepts that function in different ways within the unique theological grammars of each tradition.

More than occasionally, this mismatch lies at the root of jokes about Jews and Christians.

One day in the early 1950s, Sadie received a call in New York City that her sister Greta, who was in Miami Beach for winter, had a stroke and was in the hospital. Sadie took the first available flight to Miami and after landing went straight to the hospital. When visiting hours ended, she took a cab to the nearest hotel, which unbeknownst to her did not welcome Jewish guests.

Sadie, who looked like an old Jewish lady and had a thick Yiddish accent, went up to the counter and asked for a "chroom fir denight."

The desk agent said, "I have no rooms available."

Sadie explained her emergency situation. Tomorrow she could find another hotel, but tonight she was exhausted and needed a room. The hotel employee responded, "I am sorry ma'am, this is a restricted hotel, and we don't welcome Jews."

Sadie said, "Djews, Djews! I am not a Djew but a Catolic from de alt country." He laughed skeptically. She said, "I am a Catolic. Why don't you test me?"

So the hotelier said, "Who was Jesus' mother?"

Sadie replied, "Of course, Mary the wife of Joseph."

"Even a Jew might know that answer," he responded. "Let's try something harder: Where was baby Jesus born?"

Sadie replied, "In a manger, because some antisemite like you wouldn't chrent a chroom to a Djew!"

Just a generation or two ago some US hotels, resorts, and country clubs excluded Jewish patrons. This joke explores what, from the Jewish viewpoint, is the inanity of Christian antisemitism. Christians worship Jesus, who was born, lived, and died a Jew. Yet many of these same Christians shun and maltreat Jesus' own people. Of course there are explanations for this fact, most especially the way the church blamed the whole Jewish people for Jesus' execution, an idea that reaches back to the Gospels. But Christian antisemitism remains enigmatic to many Jews.

Solomon Epstein wakes up on a Sunday morning and, as is his custom, walks up the street to pick up a newspaper and some fresh bagels. As he is returning home, he is attacked by a man coming out of church. A police car drives by, stops, and the cop proceeds to intervene. He asks, "What is going on?"

Solomon says, “I have no idea, this guy just started in on me.”

The police officer turns to the gentile, who says, “Well, what do you expect? He’s a Jew, and the Jews killed Christ.”

The officer says, “But that happened 2,000 years ago.”

To which the man who accosted Solomon replies, “Yeah, but I just heard about it in church this morning.”

This joke highlights the connection between modern Christian antisemitism and what many scholars call the anti-Judaism of certain New Testament passages. It also points to an important aspect of Jewish-Christian relations. Christianity has defined itself in relation to and frequently against the Jewish ideas out of which it developed. Christians have a deep theological connection to Judaism, but it’s one that has often involved an adversarial relationship with imagined ancient Jews. Not infrequently this has led to Christian discrimination and violence against actual Jews whom Christians encounter in their own lives.

Many centuries ago the pope decided that all the Jews had to leave Rome. Naturally there was an uproar from the Jewish community. So the pope made a proposal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. If the Jews won, they could stay. If the pope won, the Jews had to leave.

The Jews realized that they had no choice. However, the only volunteer was a poor, simple old man named Moishe, who was not well-spoken. He made one request: that neither side be allowed to talk. The pope agreed.

The day of the great debate came. Moishe and the pope sat opposite each other. The pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. Moishe looked back at him and raised one finger. The pope stared at Moishe and waved his hand in a circle around his head. In response, Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat. The pope then pulled out a wafer and a glass of wine. In turn, Moishe pulled out an apple.

The pope stood up and said, “I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay.” Later, the pope explained what happened: “I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that we believe in the same one God. Then I waved my hand around my head to show that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground, showing that God was present

right here. I pulled out the bread and wine to show that God has given us the Eucharist. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile, Moishe explained to the Jewish community how he won the debate. "First he said that the Jews had three days to get out of Rome. I told him that not one of us was leaving. Then he told me that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I let him know that we were staying right here." "

And then what clenched the debate?" asked the rabbi.

"I don't know," said Moishe. "It was strange. He took out his lunch, so I took out mine!" (Adapted from America: The Jesuit Review, July 7, 2009)

This joke has some theological sophistication and an awareness of how social circumstances might have affected each community's theological outlook. Not only does each community have its own reading of the interaction, but each is utterly unaware of the other's understanding. Furthermore one witnesses the tendency toward Christian allegorical exegesis of scripture: the pope sees each signal as pointing to a deeper theological reality. The Jewish participant reads each sign in a more this-worldly fashion, particularly concerning the future survival of the Jewish community in Rome.

A rabbi, a priest, and a Protestant minister had a weekly golf game. One week, the three arrived at the first tee and hit drives down the fairway. They waited for the foursome ahead of them to be far enough away before they took their second shots. However, the group ahead seemed to be taking practice swings or were simply missing their balls entirely. Finally, the group ahead made it to the green, where the troubles continued. The players took forever to hole out. This continued for the entire front nine, frustrating the religious threesome.

The three clergy members retreated to the clubhouse for lunch, hoping to put some space between the two groups. The manager greeted them and asked how their day was going. They mentioned the trouble with the group ahead of them; the manager was aghast and went to look into the situation.

He soon returned. "I've checked the starter's book," he said, "and that foursome ahead of you are all avid golfers who have lost their sight, but they continue to play the game they love."

The minister was moved. “Blind and playing golf! How inspirational. Friends, I have no choice but to forego the back nine, as a sermon must be written about this right away.”

Looking sheepish, the priest said, “Blind and playing golf! And to think of the terrible things I thought about them when I figured they were just holding us up. I have to pass on the back nine and get myself to confession immediately.”

The rabbi reflected for a moment and then said, “Blind and playing golf—why the hell don’t they play at night?” (Adapted from the DCMontreal blog, August 23, 2013)

There are many Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant clergy jokes. At least one subgenre of these jokes has the rabbi saying things that are counter to audience expectation. This depiction draws on the theme of Jewish wit, but it also picks up on the fact that Jews occupy an outsider role in the larger Christian culture in North America, thus allowing them to see things rather differently. This joke also suggests that talk of Judeo-Christian morals is typically shorthand for Christian morality, taking little notice of the fact that in many areas Jews and Christians do not share the same moral outlook. One of the clearest places such moral differences can be seen is in discussions surrounding abortion.

When an interreligious panel was asked when life begins, the Catholic panelist responded, “We believe life begins at conception.”

The liberal Protestant answered, “We believe life begins at birth.”

Finally, the Jewish panelist said, “We believe life begins when the child receives his MD.”

In truth, traditional Judaism’s view of abortion is quite complex and situationally dependent. Since Jews have no single authority like the pope in Catholicism, there is a range of stricter and more lenient views on the subject, and various rabbinic thinkers reach their rulings in somewhat different ways. More conservative Christians may be distressed to discover that traditional Judaism actually requires an abortion be performed even very late in the pregnancy if the mother’s life is in danger.

A priest, a minister, and a rabbi all served as chaplains at a small state university. They would get together regularly for coffee and to talk shop.

One day, someone made the comment that preaching to people isn't really all that hard. A real challenge would be to preach to a bear. One thing led to another and they decided to do an experiment. They would all go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it.

Seven days later, they met together to discuss the experience.

Father Flannery, his arm in a sling with various bandages covering his body, went first. "I went into the woods," he said, "and when I found a bear I began to read to him from the catechism. That bear began to slap me around. I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled it on him, and, Holy Mary, Mother of God, he became as gentle as a lamb. The bishop is coming out next week to give him first communion and confirmation."

Pastor Bill spoke next. He was in a wheelchair, with an arm and both legs in casts. In his sonorous voice, he said, "I went out and found a bear and began to read to him from God's holy word! But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So I grabbed him and we wrestled and rolled down a hill until we came to a creek. Then I dunked and baptized the creature. And just as you said, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus."

They both looked down at the rabbi, who was lying in a hospital bed in a body cast with IVs and monitors running in and out of him. He was in bad shape. The rabbi looked up and said, "Perhaps circumcision wasn't the best way to start."

Circumcision has generated many great Jewish jokes, likely because it involves a ritual cutting of the male genitalia, which seems archaic by Western standards today. But Judaism, while having many elements of a faith-based religion, is fundamentally a commandment-oriented religion that speaks of the duty to live a mitzvah-filled life. Thus it makes a certain type of sense that the rabbi would try to circumcise the bear to initiate him into Judaism rather than to preach to him.

What the joke obscures is that unlike Christians, Jews do not engage in missionary efforts. Rather Jews are called to be an exemplary people, which might passively draw others toward the affirmation that Israel's God is the one true God, the creator and sustainer of the universe. This joke reveals its Christian frame of reference and highlights another important distinction between Judaism and Christianity. Christianity has tended to assert that there is no salvation outside of the church. In contrast, while Judaism welcomes interested converts, it also sees gentiles as able to

be in right relationship to God without ever converting.

A priest, minister, and rabbi met once a month over lunch to discuss congregational issues. At one lunch the priest mused aloud about the persistent mouse problem in his church building. Not wanting to kill the mice, he had a pest-control service set live traps and then release the mice in a woodsy area a mile away. A month later his church was reinfested. He wondered whether the same mice had found their way back.

The minister said he had a similar problem and had also opted for live traps. Only he had the mice released five miles away at the church retreat center property. Yet two months later it seemed that these same mice, or perhaps new ones, had overrun the church.

The rabbi noted he too had a mouse problem. He too opted for live traps. But once all the traps were full, he brought the entrapped mice into the main sanctuary, conducted a bar mitzvah service for them, and since their bar mitzvah not one of them had returned to the synagogue.

While this joke likely originated among Jews belonging to Conservative and Reform congregations in the 1960s and ’70s, today it may speak to both Jews and Christians as it highlights the growing group of people who come from a religious background but leave once they reach their teen years. This joke tends to evoke laughs in both religious traditions and can be told from either side—the mice can go through Christian confirmation instead.

That Jews and Christians face some of the same contemporary challenges should not obscure the fact that the two traditions have distinctive theological self-understandings. I recently attended a conference at which several Catholic theologians presented essays seeking to find new, but doctrinally sound, ways that Catholicism might think about Judaism and the Jewish people.

One panelist wished to receive Jewish feedback on a possible solution to how Catholics could affirm God’s unbreakable covenantal promises to the Jewish people while also affirming that there is no salvation outside the church. This distinguished Catholic theologian suggested that the existence of Hebrew Catholics—ethnic Jews who converted to Catholicism—might provide an overlooked solution to this theological crux. In my response I told the following joke.

A great rabbi with many disciples was on his deathbed. He revived a bit and called his arch-disciple Yossi over. He motioned to him to come closer and then whispered to Yossi to call a priest.

Shocked, Yossi asked the great rabbi how a devout Jew who had lived his whole life in a pious way could do such a thing. The rabbi insisted again to call a priest: he wanted to convert. Yossi refused to do so without an explanation.

The rabbi responded: "Yossi, isn't it better for one of them, rather than one of us, to die?"

My point was that focusing on Hebrew Catholics solves an ongoing tension in Catholic doctrine in a way that strikes Jewish listeners as absurd—because while clever, it does not change Catholic relations with most actual, living Jews. Instead it leaves anti-Jewish theological elements within the Christian tradition basically intact by redefining the Jews that Catholics need to account for in their theology as only those who have already converted to Catholicism. Rather than changing how Catholics might understand Judaism's place in the divine economy, it obliterates the otherness of Judaism.

A Jew converted to Christianity and, in time, was asked to deliver the Sunday sermon. After the service he asked the minister how he did. The minister replied, "You did fine. But maybe next time don't begin with, 'Good morning, fellow goyim.'"

This joke hinges on knowing that the word goyim is Hebrew for "nations" but that it is sometimes used by Jews to refer derogatorily to gentiles. Both of these jokes about Jews converting to Christianity highlight the fact that Judaism is a religion into which one is born and cannot easily, if ever, really leave. This may be because Judaism is more than a religion, and thus conversion to Christianity cannot fully undo the ties to one's Jewish identity. Or, tersely put, you can take the Jew out of Judaism but not the Judaism out of the Jew.

This perhaps partially explains why a Catholic theologian proposed that Hebrew Catholics might be the solution to the church's Jewish doctrinal conundrum. While some Christians baptized as infants may feel as though they were born into the faith, ultimately Christianity is a faith people identify with by choice. Jews who forgo Jewish practice or do not hold to biblical and rabbinic teachings may be seen as nonobservant Jews or even bad Jews in the eyes of observant Jews, but they remain Jews nonetheless.

When deployed thoughtfully, jokes can help Jews and Christians gain clarity not only on our differences but also on some ways to avoid major pitfalls in our dialogue. And when the punchline elicits shared laughter, such jokes can create a moment of insight and intimacy. But frequently the laughter is of the nervous and uncomfortable sort, pointing to the potentially unbridgeable distance between Jews and Christians. Sometimes the very jokes that make us uncomfortable reveal deeper truths that we all need to hear.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "So the rabbi says to the priest."