The "#Resurrectionchallenge": Unpacking religious jokes on social media

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Abstract

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While studies on political jokes and other forms of humour exist, very scanty literature exists on how content put on social media by or on behalf of pastors particularly in Southern Africa, constitute content for the creation of jokes which trend on various social media platforms. An example of this is the #resurrectionchallenge which started trending on social media on the 24th of February 2019 after Pastor Alph Lukau of Alleluia Ministries International allegedly raised a man from the dead. #Resurrectionchallenge itself not only points to questioning the authenticity of these pastors but also highlights how the production of the viral jokes emanating from the Pastor Lukau content speaks to a deviation from the established conventions where words by pastors are revered. Now social media users are using various artefacts in the form of videos and adding comical value to them by replicating these acts carried out by pastors such as the #resurrectionchallenge. The foundation of what is being used in order to create this comic relief online is from a religious perspective and this leads to the question of whether religion itself might now be perceived as a joke, especially in Christianity. Consequently, social media platforms provide spaces for such challenges to be performed as a mockery of the pastors performing such miracles. Focusing on videos shared on Facebook using the #resurrectionchallenge this study uses multimodal discourse analysis to shed light on the phenomenon of image creation as a communication practice.

Keywords: social media, religion, jokes, humour, parody, Facebook, Christianity, pastors, religious leaders

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Introduction

Since the advent of social media much of religious discourse has shifted drastically. The digital sphere provides an opportunity for people to keep tabs on how religious leaders and influencers represent religion. Interestingly, the burgeoning Facebook posts of religious leaders carrying out miracles has led to an increase in people not taking religion seriously and even going to the extent of making fun of these religious leaders. Facebook now serves as a platform that may be reconfiguring faith, specifically Christianity among the online community and portraying it

like a joke. Religious leaders such as pastors go to extreme lengths in ensuring that they appeal to and attract followers. Measures they sometimes employ have resulted in some social media users making jokes about these religious leaders thus belittling what was once regarded as well-respected positions of authority. The authenticity of miracles performed by the religious leaders is highly questionable and at times bordering on the ridiculous. Hence, this begs the question whether religion, especially Christianity, has become a joke?

Notwithstanding its link with amiability, humour and buoyancy, comedy can bite, hurt, offend and infuriate (Lewis, 2006). A theatrical illustration of this 'dark side of humour' is the global controversy caused by Pastor Alph Lukau of Alleluia Ministries International through his claim of resurrecting a man from the dead.An emulation of this miracle by Facebook content creators was dubbed the *#resurrectionchallenge*. In the latter part of February 2019, several online videos surfaced online humorously mimicking a resurrection performed by this pastor.These video depictions caused a major uproar amongst the online community. This paper, explores how social media platforms provide spaces for such challenges and how religion can be looked at in a negative manner.

Background

The research focuses on social media users specifically on Facebookers who use various artefacts in the form of videos and adding comical value to them by replicating certain acts carried out by pastors. The foundation of what is being used in order to create this comic relief online is from a religious perspective and this leads to the question of whether religion itself might now be perceived as a joke, especially Christianity? Facebook is chosen as a site of analysis because of its accessibility. Despite the popularity of religious jokes, there is scarcity of research on different functions of. Different opinions abound on whether jokes portray any genuineness in society or joke makers and tellers have any hidden agenda behind their association in joking practices have been articulated by some researchers (Weaver, 2011). According to Day (2011, jokes are 'merely jokes' and hence jokes that certain groups of people may find distasteful are essentially innocuous and have no severe or ideological impact.

Day further acknowledges that "[w]e know that jokes are important to us and of no consequence to anyone else and we will have the jokes we want and on our terms whether you

like them or not" (Day, 2011). Therefore, it can be argued that humour is not always nonthreatening, nor does it always work for the social good, and, although claims of offensiveness differ, humour can, in particular readings, serve ideological functions for serious discourse (Ghodsi & Heidar-Sharheza, 2016). Therefore, rather than being therapeutic, here, humour led to an absolutely disempowering challenge of being laughed at. In today's multi-religious and interconnected societies, humour and comedy often become the focus of immense controversy over alleged offensive religious content (Smith, 2009). The interconnectedness of global media platforms such as Facebook also encourages or proposes new approaches for the spread of offensive humour.

The use of Jokes

Jokes are pervasive, and they reach their national and international audience through the Internet, mobile phones, friends, colleagues, and other channels or means of communication (Brasher, 2001). Thousands of individuals and hundreds of blogs and websites are involved in the constant spreading of joking, stereotyping, and making myths about different ethnic and religious groups, races, genders and so forth. Jokes are so prevalent that they are often used at most official meetings, gatherings, and news conferences as a way of 'breaking the ice.' Religious figures also exploit jokes in their sermons to consolidate their reasoning and convince people of the veracity of their complicated arguments or narratives. With regard to its role in society, humour may function as a social corrective, which is used by society to correct the deviant behavior (Bergson 1999), or as a "defense mechanism to neutralize aggressive or violent behavior" (Hughey and Muradi, 2009). Jokes tackle an assortment of concerns, ranging from the most philosophical outlooks to the day-to-day affairs of a community or nation. According to Lockyer (2006) humour can be utilised in stressful circumstances to reduce worry, whilst concurrently upholding the status quo. For instance, doctors may joke and laugh together about death when faced with dead bodies because they are struggling with the difficult situation but also sustaining the business of medical work and the aftereffect of the attempt at humour hinges on a complex interaction of the identity of the joker, the joking context and the characteristics of the audience (Lockyer, 2006). Coincidentally, Saroglou & Jaspard (2001) highlight that humour creation seems to be related to high extraversion, low diligence and high candidness and the anticipation then was that these three factors would also be involved in impulsive humour creation as a response to hypothetical stressful everyday situations. Kayam et al. (2014:7) argue that "every expression of humour, whatever its content, has an element of criticism that says that the humourist or the one laughing in response to the humour is

expressing a position about the object of the humour."

> According to Niebuhr (1990:15), *"Insofar as the sense of humor is a recognition of incongruity, it is more profound than any philosophy which seeks to devour incongruity in reason. But the sense of humor remains healthy only when it deals with immediate issues and faces the obvious and surface irrationalities. It must move toward faith or sink into despair when the ultimate issues are raised. That is why there is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer, and no laughter, in the holy of holies."*

Facebook serving as a record of truth

Pastors are fast becoming content creators and they market themselves through the videos they post online. Therefore, Facebook as an online media platform provides spaces for the pastor's content to be performed and posted for viewers to see. These religious leaders may have had nowhere else to express themselves before but with the advent of digital media they now have an opportunity to communicate their beliefs, doctrines and miracles through social media. These videos may also provide entertaining, educational and emboldening content for the viewers who can always go back to review the information that was posted on Facebook and inspire themselves. The content can also serve to help them unwind after a long hectic day. Furthermore, like newspapers Facebook is now becoming a record of truth as viewers are able to refer to some Facebook posts in order to ensure if something indeed occurred.

Capps (2006) asserts that, "religion expresses the need for the reduction of uncertainty, and is associated with a risk-avoiding attitude, with orderliness, the need for control, moderate to high conservatism, and moderate to high dogmatism." However, in this instance religion is doing the opposite and is instead only exacerbating uncertainty and disorderliness. The actions exhibited by these religious leaders are promoting an attitude of taking risks and the need for control. On the other hand, Donnelly (1992) notes that humour gives disproportionate attention to some things to the neglect of other things in their rightful proportionality.

Methodological Framework

This research draws from Halliday's (1978) social semiotic theory that postulates the basis for the study of semiotic resources other than language (e.g. images, gesture, clothing etc) and, significantly, the interaction of semiotic resources in a field known as multimodal analysis or

multimodality. The theory is concerned with the principal intention (or 'grammar') of semiotic resources and their interactions with each other, specified as inter-related semantic systems which are seen to fulfill four functions which according to Li (2016) are:

- To interpret our experience of the world (experiential meaning);
- To create logical relations between experiential meanings (logical meaning)
- To enact social relations (interpersonal meaning) and
- To organise meanings into coherent messages in text (textual meaning).

Multimodal discourse analysis reflects on how text draw on certain styles of communication such as pictures, film, video, images and sound in combination with words to make meaning (Li, 2016). It has examined print genres as well as genres such as web pages, film and television programs. The use of multimodal discourse both established a 'proximity' to the events and engages people in the experiences into people's homes (Li, 2016). This changes the viewer from a position of 'spectator' to a position of 'witness' of the events.

At the time of writing, a Facebook search for *#resurrectionchallenge* yielded 89 videos.However, for this research only 15 videos were analysed which included the original resurrection video.The videos were chosen for analysis on the basis of diversity, in an attempt to form a thematic overview of the parodies. When enough videos illustrated the treatment of one particular impression, as each new instance repeated common traits, and when no new impressions were found, collection stopped. Therefore, the size of the sample (15 videos) was determined by analysing variations, and consequently concluding that data saturation was achieved (Saumure & Given, 2008).

According to da Silva and Garcia (2012) "when something becomes highly popular and spreads quickly online, it is described as "viral." Furthermore, Burgess (2008:101) states that the term 'viral' describes *"videos which are viewed by a large number of people, generally as a result of knowledge about the video being spread rapidly through the internet population via word-of-mouth."* The videos that will be discussed in this paper immediately became viral once they were posted on Facebook. The original video of the said, "resurrection challenge" was posted on Facebook in the latter part of February 2019.

To discuss this series of Facebook videos, the unit of analysis was the video itself and its

respective title and author/poster. According to some YouTube researchers', "meanings are communicated through video titles, descriptions, visual and audio content, and written commentary" (Strangelove, 2010:156). The description provided by the creator (when available), and, in certain cases, other contextual elements, were also considered. In order to form a sample, Facebook search boxes were used by typing in the words, "Resurrection challenge." Following theoretical reflections on parody, it could be argued that Facebook videos are closer to the definition of "parody satires," since the methods typical of parody are employed; yet, the target is optional (Hutcheon, 2000).

Despite a predominance of English, there are several instances where some of the videos were in other languages. For instance, some of the videos were in Zulu, Shona and Setswana. Therefore, there was a restriction on the selection of the videos. So the language that was best understood by the researcher was part of the criteria used in selecting the videos.

In all the videos watched, the scene's action was followed thoroughly, namely the exchange on who is speaking and the defining moments (commanding the corpse to come to life, rising from the bed by the resurrected individual, the facial expression of the resurrected, delivering the news of the resurrection to the audience, screaming and singing in excitement by the audience after resurrection). There is a conjecture that the discord generated by the mixing of a scene of such theatrical force with such humorous actions is very effective in ensuring that the attention of video watchers and creators is captured, regardless of their knowledge, interest or opinion as to the original work (Attardo, 2008). The clashing of genres, tones, intentions and expectations is a common characteristic of remixes, especially when irony and a satirising disposition are present (da Silva and Garcia, 2012).

List of the resurrection challenge videos analysed. Data collected between April and November 2019.

Upload	Title	Author/Poster
1. 26/02/2019	Issa resurrection challenge	Luthando Ltee Bhesi
2. 04/03/2019	Resurrection Challenge	Pulse Live Kenya Lifes
3. 26/02/2019	Afia Schwarzenegger Joins the Resurrection Challenge	Pulse Ghana
4. 27/02/ 2019	In other news...Resurrection Challenge	Kelvin Ikeduba

5.	26/02/2019	Resurrection Challenge	Carolyne Rita Mutua
6.	26/02/2019	Resurrection Challenge Continues	Thabo KD Dlamini
7.	26/02/2019	The Walking Dead	Afrovues
8.	27/02/2019	South Africans Do the Resurrection Challenge	The Guardian
9.	4 April 2019	This South African Pastor raises a dead man	Wada7 Africa
10.	27/02/2019	Who did the resurrection challenge better	Thenet.ng
11.	27/02/2019	My own resurrection challenge	Angela Nwosu Page
12.	26/02/2019	Resurrection Challenge 2	Oh Afrika
13.	26/02/2019	The funniest among all the Resurrection Challenge videos	Bigscout Nana Prempeh
14.	27/02/2019	Resurrection Challenge South African mock pastor	Dr Tawanda Benson
15.	27/02/2019	Mokoko Resurrection Challenge	Kgosi Ali Al

Analysis and Findings

Religious leaders' actions becoming comical artefacts

The video of the actual "controversial resurrection" depicts Pastor Alph Lukau going towards a casket in which there is a man. This resurrection takes place on Sunday at the premises of the Alleluia Ministries International Church in South Africa, where Pastor Lukau explains to the crowd that this young man *(Elliot)* has been dead since Friday. It is interesting to note the similarities between the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the Bible and the death and resurrection of *Elliot*. *Elliot* supposedly died on Friday (Preparation day) like Jesus Christ and was resurrected in the same manner on a Sunday (first day of the week) as well *(see Matthew 16:21; 17:22,23, Luke 24: 6,7 NIV)*. Furthermore, there is also a likeness between the resurrection of Lazarus in the bible and *Elliot's*. Pastor Lukau calls out the dead man's name, *Elliot* and then he touches the coffin and the 'corpse' and shouts again, *"Elliot, rise up."* Suddenly, the man in the coffin dressed in white clothes (a white suit and white shoes) rises up with his mouth open in surprise and what could be termed as a highly dramatized manner and gets out of the coffin (see figure 1). A similar thing occurred when Jesus Christ called out his friend's name in a loud voice, *"Lazarus, come forth"* and Lazarus immediately arose and came out of the tomb *(see also John 11:43,44 NIV)*. Some Facebook content creators also make the white clothes worn by the resurrected man a mockery when they post a picture of a white suit,

shoes and gloves and caption it "Resurrection Starter Kit" (see figure 2). The content creator of this post points out that they are selling this kit at an unnamed price thus triggering humorous comments from observers.

Afterwards, the risen man *Elliot* looks at the massive crowd around him in a seemingly dazed state with the crowd heard roaring out loud and clapping hands at the miracle that has just transpired. There is a song that is playing in the background with lyrics that say, "*Favour for your trouble*" and it plays continuously as the young man is supported as he walks by some congregants (see figure 3). The pastor points out to the congregation that this young man has been dead since Friday and hence has been fasting for three days implying that he must be hungry. A plate of food is brought to him and he starts to eat with a dazed and disorientated expression on his face. One of the comments posted was that, *"coffin will make you hungry baba."* Some other comments made are that this whole so-called resurrection miracle is a comedy and one other calls it a 'pantomime.' A pantomime refers to a joke or a farce. It is clear that the majority of the viewers see this "resurrection" as a travesty and mockery to the Christian religion. Consequently, a famous satirical video of Hitler reacting to the resurrection was created after the resurrection challenge.

All images were downloaded from Facebook

Figure 1   Figure 2 Resurrection Starter Kit

One viewer makes a thought provoking comment that, *"They are making it too easy now…All the lies are being unveiled because of social media, they can't suppress the information anymore."* This points out to the deduction that Facebook is now becoming a digital archive and hence, information that could easily be erased can now be revisited and be used as evidence

to corroborate certain allegations made. As *Elliot* constantly looks around at the massive crowd with his mouth agape the comments made on the video are that the whole scene appears to be staged which, further leads to some observers claiming that it was all set up in order to get high ratings. Some of the comments made are, *"What has Christianity become?"* another one states in Zulu, a language spoken in South Africa, "*Lomfo ufanelwe yirole ku generations, ya actor one lol."* Translated, *"This young man would be suited by a role in Generations, he is an actor."* Generations is a local popular drama in South Africa. This is a story that just seems to get funnier by the moment with eagle-eyed people pointing out what they believe to be *"ridiculous details that disprove his miracle."* For instance, Marmysz (2003) states that, "The humorous attitude involves an ability to create and adopt novel and unexpected perspectives from which the otherwise painful, frustrating, and threatening incongruities of life may be revealed as potential objects of merriment."

After the "controversial resurrection" video there followed several videos where Facebook content creators derisively mimicked the resurrection. This was then referred to as the *#resurrectionchallenge*. The videos served to show people's creativity and portrayed satirical comedy as a branch of communication on social media platforms. Some of the videos featured people coming out of dustbins, some buried themselves in sand at the beach, some resurrected on bar counter tops and immediately reached for beer. In some instances, these content creators even indicated that this resurrection was not only for people but animals as well, with dogs and cats "resurrected." A particular video depicts an older sibling about to dish chicken relish from a pot for his eagerly waiting younger siblings. As he lifts the lid of the pot a chicken that is very much alive runs out of the pot. Everyone present leaves everything and runs away in fear. This particular video was entitled, *"Mokoko Resurrection Challenge."* Mokoko refers to a cock in Setswana. One of the questions raised was how a dead man carried around a cell phone and if indeed that was a cell phone, when people called who would actually take that call since he was already dead? (See figure 3 & 4). This comment had connotations of jest in it. People mockingly commented on the Facebook posts that, *"he had his cell phone in order for him to call Mr Delivery,"* and *"We're in trouble, you commit suicide we send your body to these Pastors and you come back to life to face your problems!!"* From the comments it was clear that the majority of people viewed this "resurrection" as a joke and a mockery to Christianity. The interconnectedness of global media forms such as the Internet also encourages or offers new methods for the spread of satirical humour (Simpson, 2003).

Figure 3

Figure 4

Criminality among 21st Century Pastors – Religious Leaders or Charlatans?

The globalized social media platforms serve to spread the Christian gospel internationally. Although this was an incident that occurred in South Africa, several countries worldwide quickly became privy to this resurrection and had opinions about its authenticity. For instance, one of the pages that this video was posted on is called, "Fight Crime in Botswana," a group that serves to warn the public of Botswana about any criminal activities in the country and how to curb them. Interestingly enough, the posting of such a video on this page simply implied that some Facebook users felt that what Pastor Lukau had done was tantamount to a criminal act. The comments also supported this notion of criminality. Some of the comments made which were mostly in Setswana (one of the languages spoken in Botswana) are, *"Ba re kgonne bo daddy"* which means *"the daddies conquered us*." *Daddy* is a name that is often used by members of a church congregation for the leader of their church or head pastor. Another comment says, *Ba tshwanetse ba thathelwa magodu a"* which translates, *"These thieves should be jailed."* Other comments are, *"waitse ke heletswe"* translated, *"I have no words"* and *"legodimo ga se la bone."* translated, *"Heaven is not theirs."* These comments are followed

by several emojis of a person laughing hysterically. It can be deduced from the comments made that there is a lot of anger as well as humour directed towards these pastors or religious leaders. There were also allegations made that Pastor Lukau was not a first time offender in deceiving people. He was accused of staging another resurrection at a mysterious hospital a few years back (see figure 5). The lack of basic hospital equipment such as drips except for the beds, led to some Facebook users believing that this too was a staged event. The lack of trust in religious leaders or Christianity nowadays can be viewed as a mockery of religion.
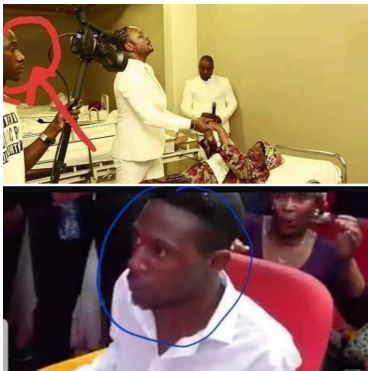

Figure 5

Conclusion

Humour is part of humanity's past, and satire in particular seems to thrive when both society and individuals demand it as a form of expression. In the twenty-first century, this need seems to be present, as newspapers, television, films and the Internet display more and more instances of pictorial satire. One can hardly deny that *"satiric media texts have become a part of (and a preoccupation of) mainstream political coverage,"* but has this made *"satirists legitimate players in serious political dialogue"* as (Vetlesen, 2011) claims? Although the findings of this study are not conclusive because of the size of the sample, they provide a snapshot of the classification, as well as different social and psychological functions and implications of religious jokes. So pastors such as Pastor Alph Lukau through videos such as the resurrection challenge are becoming content creators, who in a bid to drive traffic to themselves will go to any degree to ensure that this is showcased in such a grandiose manner. One might draw parallels with the click-bait style of harvesting followers, which has further led to the creation and circulation of fake news within Christianity.

A closer examination of the samples of *#resurrectionchallenge* videos here discussed, indicates that Facebook users employ parody and humour as methods of exposing the weaknesses of religious leaders and the Christian religious system, following the long-standing tradition of satirists, countering messages created in the context of religious communication. Not only are the strategies of pastors exposed, but also the inner workings of the media and the relation between the two. Through image manipulation, pastors and media actors are turned into their own discrediting representatives and thus participating in their own mockery. Therefore, humour plays a major role in 21st century religious discourse, rather than merely diverting the attention of citizens from such matters. In this sense, satirical content creation may be regarded as a new form of participation, especially as cause-oriented religious action, and contributes to the formation of counter-publics that bring new vitality to the religious debate.

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