

HUMOR AGAINST HEGEMONY: IRONY, SATIRE AND PARODY AIMED AT THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH^{1*}

Miloš Jovanović^{2**}

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Serbia

Abstract

The paper deals with the analysis of the interpretations and “framings” of the Serbian Orthodox Church in publicly shared comic content.

The Church in contemporary Serbian society is an organization with a considerable reputation among the citizens, endowed with great trust. It has numerous privileges and utilizes a fair number of resources provided by the political oligarchy. The Church enjoys a prominent public presence, both through the formal involvement of clergy and Church representatives in the work of secular institutions, and through the informal everyday practices of people. The hegemonic position of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as a (self-)proclaimed moral and spiritual leader, makes it a particularly suitable target for mocking and comic treatment using irony, satire and parody.

The undertaken analysis conceptually relies on Gramsci’s deliberations on hegemony and Peter Berger’s constructivist approach to humor. Using netnography as the method for data collection and thematic analysis for data interpretation, the study will demonstrate the delegitimizing potential of ridicule in social struggles. The analysed and interpreted data is comprised of visual and textual content that was created as a reaction to various public appearances of the Church. Most often thematized were “blunders”, “inappropriate” behavior, “problematic” statements and attitudes of Church dignitaries, as well as the practices of the Church representatives seen as opposed to the Christian teachings and the moralities preached by the Church (material opulence, moralizing and interference in the private lives of the people, aggressive outbursts, supporting disavowed politicians, superstition, sex misconduct and other scandals).

Keywords: Serbian Orthodox Church, Hegemony, Humor, Symbolic struggle, Netnography, Thematic Analysis

¹ * Corresponding author: milos.jovanovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

The paper is based on the presentation “Humor against Hegemony: Ridiculing the Serbian Orthodox Church”, delivered at the *16th Conference of the European Sociological Association, “Tension, Trust and Transformation”* held in Porto, Portugal from 27–30 August 2024.

This study was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovations of the Republic of Serbia (Contract No. 451-03-137/2025-03/ 200165).

Please cite as: Jovanović, M. (2025). Humor against Hegemony: Irony, Satire and Parody Aimed at the Serbian Orthodox Church. *Godišnjak za sociologiju*, 21(34): 71–95.

² **  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0630-0886>

The jokes were the tip of an iceberg of discontent.
(Davies, 2007, p. 304)

Introduction

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has increasingly gained political influence, especially since the late 1980s. It has assumed a central role in the nation-building process in the 21st century. The widespread social acceptance of Orthodox symbols, imagery, and religious rituals among the general public, while primarily representing nominal religious affiliation, also implicitly signal ethnic identity and collective belonging for the Serbian people (Metreveli, 2021, p. 321). The SOC benefits from various concessions and financial support that facilitate its activities in areas such as finance, religious education, media regulation, and participation, as well as in the privileged restitution of property confiscated after World War II.

The significant government funding directed towards the SOC serves as clear evidence of the strengthened relationship between the state and the church (Jovanović, 2022, pp. 52-53). From 2002 to the beginning of 2017, the Serbian state allocated around €90 million for the needs of all churches and religious communities, of which the Serbian Orthodox Church received by far the most, with Church not being obliged to give any account for the use of the donations (Jovanović, 2024).³ A particularly visible indicator of the status that the SOC has in Serbian society is a ubiquitous “construction boom with more churches, monasteries, parish halls, bishops’ palaces and houses for priests, built in the last two decades than in the SOC’s entire history” (Aleksov & Lackenby, 2022, p. 217).

Having a firm grip on hearts and minds (and state budget) of the people, the Serbian Orthodox Church occupies a *hegemonic position* in Serbian society. The concept of *hegemony* is usually defined as a cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life by imposing its worldview, i. e., cultural ideal. “It is the power to establish the ‘common sense’ or ‘doxa’ of a society, the fund of self-evident descriptions of social reality that normally go without saying” (Fraser, 1992, p. 53).

Hegemony (egemonia culturale) is a term that Antonio Gramsci used for the “discursive face of power”. It is obtained through struggles for meaning and power “performed by individuals who elaborate and bring cultural essentials to the fore”, and through conflicts “in which beliefs, symbolism, and practices are open to antagonistic interpretations” (Forlenza, 202, p. 39). Predominance or hegemonic rule is obtained by consent rather than force, and it usually entails implicit or uncritical intellectual or emotional acceptance of the sociopolitical order (see: Gramsci, 1971, p. 323; 326).

Generally speaking, “humor, as a boundary-challenging phenomenon, is attracted to rule-bound manifestations of religion and (...), conversely, religious authorities tend to be wary of the subversive effects of irreverent humor” (Schweizer,

³ As we are writing this article, the public is learning that another “51.9 million dinars have been allocated from the budget reserve for subsidies to the Serbian Orthodox Church dioceses” (Petaković, 2025).

2024, p. 557). The insight that “comedy and religion are mutually attracting phenomena” (Schweizer, 2020, p. 162), is even more valid in situations where a religious institution holds a hegemonic position in society.

Peter Berger, taking cues from Alfred Schütz’s theory of multiple realities (Schütz, 1962), wrote of comic as one possible “intrusion” that poses a threat to the routines of the taken-for-granted reality:

“Social order, when it functions well, envelops the individual in a web of habits and meanings that are experienced as self-evidently real. (...) Despite this semblance of solidity, social order is always vulnerable to disruptions. These disruptions are caused, among other things, by the intrusions of *other* realities. The sacred is one such intrusion. The comic is another.” (Berger, 2014, p. 61)

Although in a constant tension, religion and humor can also be seen as “emancipating provinces of meaning” (Barber, 2017), providing relief from the tediousness and anxieties of the everyday life routines – an ever-needed escape from the firm grip of the social order, upheld by hegemony of the mighty.

Over the past two decades, the Serbian Orthodox Church – a historically dominant cultural institution – has become a somewhat frequent target of online humor and satire in Serbia. Social media users, satirists, and commentators have lampooned the Church’s clergy and practices through memes, cartoons, parody news, video clips and sketches. These humorous expressions reflect underlying social tensions and serve as a form of “symbolic struggle” (Bourdieu, 2018) against the Church’s hegemonic role.

Method and Data

This paper examines the primary forms and themes of humor targeting the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), analyzing the content and rhetoric of these jokes, as well as their social functions and reception within contemporary Serbian society. Data collection was carried out using netnography, a qualitative research method adapted from ethnography that explores social interactions and cultural meanings within digital communication contexts (Kozinets, 2020; Kozinets & Gambetti, 2021; Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2014). The data were derived from the digital traces of public conversations, intense debates, commentaries, columns, news articles, blogs, and social media posts, tweets, and comments across various communication networks.

The analyzed sample consisted of over 120 publicly accessible items, including memes, caricatures, photos, comments, and satirical pieces, predominantly sourced from Facebook, where these materials are commonly shared. The content, both visual and textual, was created in response to various instances involving the SOC or its representatives, whether as active participants or subjects of public attention. Interpretation of the data was carried out through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012; 2022).

In what follows, we will examine: 1) the most common forms of humor used in relation to SOC (e.g., memes, caricatures, satire, parody, etc.); 2) the dominant themes and recurring motifs in these humorous expressions; 3) the content of jokes, memes, and satirical pieces and

their underlying social significance, and 4) the functioning of humor in contemporary Serbian society as a form of social critique, resistance, or reinforcement of cultural narratives.

Forms of Humor Targeting the SOC

A primary mode of ridiculing the SOC are viral images or short videos with humorous captions – circulated on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media. A number of Facebook pages and Twitter threads share images that parody priests, churches, or religious rituals. These often consist of a photo (or iconography altered in Photoshop) accompanied by a biting caption. For example, one meme joked that church attendance has “decreased drastically in the last couple of years” simply because “people just don’t have the money”, implying the Church cares more about donations than redemption of souls. A large number of analyzed pieces exhibited contempt for the mutual alliance of religion and moneyed interests.

Figure 1

Former Patriarch’s grim note



Other viral posts include one-liners and screenshots lampooning church leaders’ statements – for instance, users widely shared and mocked a video of Patriarch Porfirije disparaging gender-inclusive language, sparking a wave of reactions online (Reporting Diversity Network, 2023). Such posts spread rapidly and allow everyday citizens to participate in the humor with comments and shares.

Satirical News and Parody Sites

Serbia’s popular satire news site *Njuz.net* has featured numerous pieces ridiculing the SOC. These articles mimic real news but with absurd twists that highlight perceived church failings. For example, *Njuz.net* “reported” that the SOC called on citizens “not to lose faith in Vučić” because “our salvation depends on faith in this man” (Dražić, 2019) – a sharp parody of the Church’s closeness to President Vučić. Another piece joked that the Church had ordered 5,000 pilates balls to lure priests away from the “sin of yoga,” so clergy could “stretch as God commands, and not as Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva command” (Milosavljević, 2023). These parody articles, shared on social media, use deadpan reportage and irony to expose the Church’s political entanglements or dogmatism.

Caricatures and Digital Art

Political cartoonists and digital artists have also satirized the SOC in newspapers and online. Caricatures by renowned cartoonists like Predrag Koraksić Corax and Dušan Petričić exaggerate the features and actions of church leaders for comic effect. Such cartoons often appear in independent media (*Danas*, *NIN*, etc.) and get shared online. One Petričić cartoon in 2021, for instance, depicted Patriarch Porfirije seated at a lavish table among political power-brokers (including the president's inner circle) – a visual satire of the Church's alliance with the ruling elite (Nikolić, 2021).

Figure 2

"Change the society in the New Year – Good luck!"



Another series of Corax cartoons so sharply criticized the SOC that it even prompted debate on whether they crossed into hate speech (Jovićević, 2023). Digital art projects have also reimagined Orthodox imagery satirically; artist Aleksandar Todorović painted “ironic icons” using traditional iconography style but portraying contemporary figures and vices instead of saints (RFE/RL’s Balkan Service, 2018), blending art and parody to comment on church and state. These visual mediums – whether simple memes or detailed illustrations – are a powerful and shareable form of humor.

Comedic Videos and Performances

Video satire has played a role as well. Serbian TV comedians and YouTubers have created sketches that mock the SOC’s image. In 2013, for example, popular talk-show host Ivan Ivanović aired a fake commercial for the Serbian Orthodox Church

on primetime television (Ivanović, 2013). This skit mimicked advertisement tropes to humorously “promote” the Church, likely highlighting its opulence or influence in a tongue-in-cheek way. Similarly, satirical TV shows like *24 minuta sa Zoranom Kesićem* regularly include segments poking fun at church officials’ public statements and the state’s deference to the clergy (for one example see: *24 minuta sa Zoranom Kesićem*, 2024). Amateur comedy videos on YouTube and TikTok – from parody sermons to comedic songs about church scandals – have also added to the trend. In all these formats, the SOC’s stature is playfully subverted through irony and absurdity.

Dominant Themes and Motifs in SOC Satire

Despite the variety of formats, the humor directed at the SOC converges on a set of recurring themes and motifs. A thematic analysis of over a hundred such memes, posts, and cartoons finds that they most commonly target the Church on issues of greed, hypocrisy, and entanglement with power.

Greed, Wealth, and Corruption

A prominent motif is the *avarice* of church officials – satire often portrays priests and bishops as overly fond of money and luxury. Jokes reference bishops riding in expensive cars, church leaders living in elite neighborhoods (e.g., Belgrade’s upscale Dedinje district), or the constant seeking of donations from a struggling populace. The subtext is that the SOC has strayed from its professed ideals of modesty, implying the Church’s pursuit of wealth drives away believers. Allegations of financial misconduct, like misused funds or tax evasion, are also fertile ground – a meme retorting to the Patriarch’s moral pronouncements stated, “Serbian women have no duties; *your duty is to pay taxes!*”, directly accusing the Church of not contributing its fair share. These jokes tap into public perceptions of the Church as a wealthy institution insufficiently accountable to society.

Figure 3

“Serbian women’s duty is to procreate and give birth! / Serbian women have no duties; *your duty is to pay taxes!*”





Figure 4

"Where is Dedinje⁴ here? I'm looking for Porfirije"

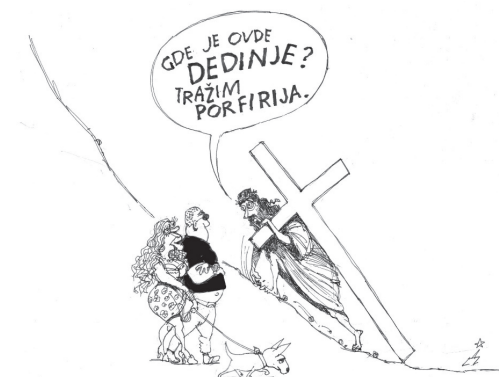


Figure 5

Current Patriarch touched by the hand with money



⁴ Dedinje: high society's favourite place of residence (comparable to *le XVI^e arrondissement* in Paris, London's *Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea* or Berlin's *Charlottenburg*).

Moral Hypocrisy and Scandals

Many humorous jabs highlight the contradiction between the SOC's preached morals and the behavior of its clergy. Memes invoke known scandals – from priests caught in illicit affairs or alleged sexual misconduct, to monks involved in drug or alcohol incidents – to underscore clerical fallibility. The humor tends to be biting, as a number of jokes specifically lampoon improper behavior of the clerics (financial, drug and/or sex scandals), blending dark humor with public outrage. Satirists also accuse the Church of glorifying evildoers – a reference to instances where Church officials have officiated funerals or bestowed blessings on controversial figures (such as convicted war criminals or corrupt politicians). Cartoonists illustrate this hypocrisy by drawing smiling bishops handing halos to dubious characters, or by showing churchmen turning a blind eye to sins when power or money is involved. Such motifs reinforce the view that the Church fails to practice what it preaches, providing rich material for satire.

Figure 6

Orthodox porn film festival⁵



⁵ The joke refers to the situation when The Holy Synod watched a pornographic video of Bishop Kačavenda. For more details see: Trivić, 2013.

Figure 7

“Each (gives) to their own” (“Your Holiness, how about another medal for this reverend and worthy servant of our God? It would mean a lot to him.”)⁶ / “How much for this one?”⁷



Political Entanglement and Power

Another dominant theme is the SOC's close alignment with nationalist politics and the ruling elite. Humorists frequently portray Church leaders as extensions of the government or ruling party, rather than independent moral authorities. The satirical news cited above – with the Church instructing people to have “faith in Vučić” for salvation – is a direct parody of this entanglement. In the spoof, Patriarch Irinej (then head of SOC) supposedly extols President Aleksandar Vučić's “daily sacrifices” and even lists “Vučić's miracles” (such as not using the toilet for 15 hours during a parliamentary session, or feeding the multitudes with one pot of squid) – a tongue-in-cheek comparison of Vučić to a saintly figure performing miracles. This kind of *hyperbolic parody*, mixing religious language with political commentary, highlights how closely satire links the Church to state power. In one of the memes, the word *patrijarh* (patriarch) was altered to “party-arch”, implying the Church serves the party line.⁸ The overarching motif is that the SOC, instead of acting as an

⁶ The caricature refers to Dragan J. Vučićević, the editor in chief of the notorious *Informer* tabloid.

⁷ Minister of Finance Siniša Mali is asking for the price of the medal at the church store.

⁸ At the end of November 2021, a protest took place in Serbia against the Rio Tinto company, which intended to mine lithium in the Jadar Valley (with an agreement with the Government of Serbia). Citizens repeatedly asked Patriarch Porfirije for support – to use his position and influence President Vučić to repeal the Law on Referendum and the Law on Expropriation (and thus prevent the exploitation of lithium in the area of Podrinje). However, the support was not given, since, according to the patriarch, “it is not the primary job of the Serbian Orthodox Church to deal with social, economic and political issues”, and that “the reaction of the Church is sought by those who have not even entered it”. The patriarch's statement

independent spiritual guide, has overstepped its domain by involving itself in secular governance (especially in education) and nationalist agendas. This theme resonates strongly in a society where Church and state are officially separate (Article 11 of the Constitution), and the humor serves to call out that blurred boundary.

Figure 8

Parodying the Patriarch (hammer instead of “T”; “PARTYARCH”)

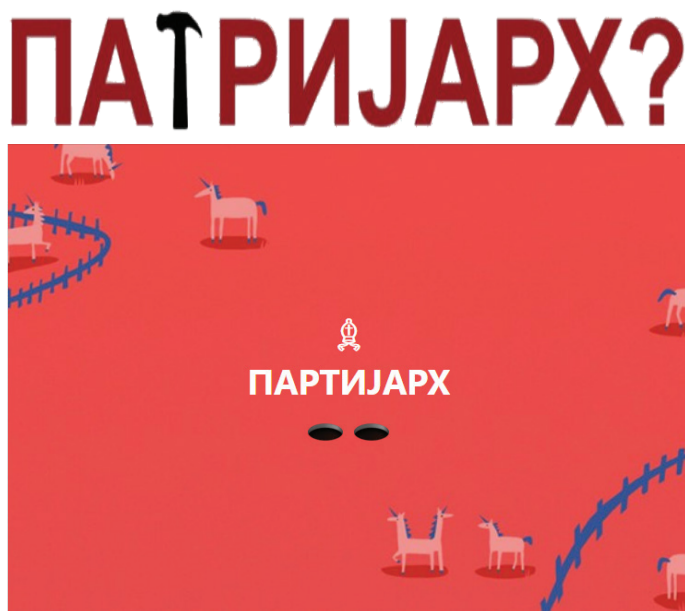


Figure 9

Patriarch being payed to keep quiet about Rio Tinto in Serbia



equated citizens who peacefully protested with thugs who attacked them with excavators, batons and rubber mallets with the intention of “breaking up” the protest. Hence the hammer replacing the “T”.

Dogmatism, Backwardness, and Fanaticism

Many satirical pieces poke fun at what they see as the SOC's rigidity and outdated attitudes. This includes the Church's stance on social issues, education, science, and other spiritual practices. For example, when a high-ranking bishop condemned the popular practice of yoga as satanic, *Njuz.net* ran the parody about issuing pilates balls to keep priests away from "the hell of meditation". The absurd image of clergy bouncing on pilates balls "as God commands" instead of stretching on yoga mats lampoons the Church's perceived paranoia toward anything non-Christian. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Church insisted on traditional communion with a shared spoon despite public health concerns (Jovanović, 2022), satirists responded with dark humor. One widely shared meme created a fictional new saint – "Saint Asepsolius the Sterile" – depicted as urging people to "wash your hands for goodness' sake". The caption "God protects you, don't be afraid – take it!" was mockingly attributed to clergy encouraging communion, highlighting the perceived denial of science. Other jokes target the Church's views on women's and LGBT rights as antiquated. The "backwardness" motif thus comes through in caricatures of priests as dark anti-englighteners. Such humor underscores a clash between a progressive, secular outlook and the traditionalist, dogmatic positions associated with the Church.

Figure 10

"School. Who turned off the light?" / "Won't be needing that"



Figure 11

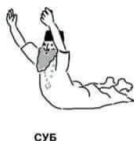
“Saint Asepsolius the Sterile, the Blessed” / “God protects you, don’t be afraid – take it!”



Figure 12

“OrthoPilates®. With the blessing of the SOC. Exclaicercise⁹ with love!”

ПРАВОПИЛАТЕС®
УЗ БЛАГОСЛОВ СПЦ
ВОЗГИБНИМО С ЉУБАВЉУ!



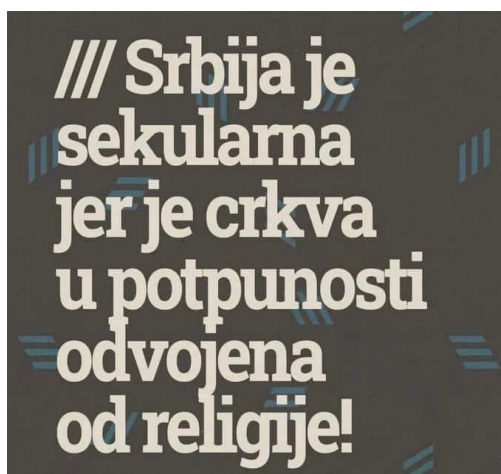
⁹ “Возгибнимо” – word pun, combination of the archaic “воскликнимо” (exclaim) and “гибање” (movement, exercise). Also, a reference to the first line of the Hymn to St. Sava: “Воскликнимо с љубављу светитељу Сави”.

Moral Contradictions and Dogma vs. Reality

A unifying motif across these themes is moral contradiction – the Church is ridiculed for failing to live up to its own teachings. Satire often uses the Church's own rhetoric and symbols to expose these contradictions. For instance, a clever meme declared, "Serbia is secular because the church is completely separated from religion!" – a jibe that the SOC has become so politicized and materialistic that it is effectively divorced from genuine spirituality (hence "separated from religion"). In essence, the humor holds up a mirror: the very values the Church preaches (humility, charity, faith, piety) are inverted by the Church's actions (opulence, political lobbying, intolerance), and the jokes latch onto that irony.

Figure 13

"Serbia is secular because the church is completely separated from religion!"



These recurring themes – corruption, hypocrisy, political collusion, intolerance – form the core of the satirical narrative about the SOC. In satiric content, "clerics are portrayed as failed professionals who concentrate on fund raising instead of spirituality, and are more interested in political power than in ... modesty, morality and charity" (Tsakona, 2011, p. 257). Through exaggeration and mockery, the humor continuously reinforces this critical image of the Church.

Content, Structure and Rhetorical Strategies of the Jokes

The content and style of jokes and memes about the SOC reveal several rhetorical strategies: irony, parody, satire, and absurd exaggeration are the most prevalent. Creators of these jokes skillfully use the language and symbols of both Orthodoxy and pop culture to maximize comedic effect and social commentary.

Irony and Role Reversal

Much of the humor is highly ironic, saying the opposite of what is expected to highlight a point. For example, the satirical claim that “our salvation depends on faith in (President) Vučić” (Dražić, 2019) puts a politician in the role of a savior – a clear reversal of the Church’s teaching that salvation comes only through Christ. By having an SOC statement idolize a living politician with quasi-religious devotion, the satire underlines the irony of a supposedly pious institution seemingly worshipping worldly power. Likewise, the line “Serbia is secular because the church is completely separated from religion” is pure irony – it uses a literal truth (a secular state separates church from governance) to deliver a sarcastic punch: the Church, by its behavior, appears separated from genuine religion. Such ironic twists force readers to reevaluate the reality behind official narratives.

Parody of Religious Forms

Satirists often mimic religious language, rituals, or iconography in a parodying way. This rhetorical strategy both pokes fun and signals the target clearly. In the *Njuz.net* piece on “losing faith in Vučić,” the author structured it like a church communiqué or sermon, complete with a list of “miracles” and even referencing apocryphal “gospels” – “the Gospel according to Sarapa... Vučićević... Marić” (naming pro-government media figures as evangelists). This parody of biblical style casts the regime as a kind of cult and the Church as its mouthpiece, a satirical analogy that is immediately recognizable. During the COVID controversy, the creation of “Saint Asepsolius” with a mock icon image and saintly title is a parody of the Orthodox tradition of saints and relics, used here to humorously sanctify public health guidelines. Through such parodic techniques, the humor appropriates sacred symbols (saints, gospels, liturgical pronouncements) and flips them into tools of critique.

Hyperbole and Absurdity

Exaggeration to absurd levels is another hallmark of SOC-related jokes. By taking a real issue and stretching it to a ludicrous extreme, satirists expose its underlying folly. The *Njuz.net* story attributing fantastical feats to Vučić – not using the bathroom for 15 hours, feeding crowds with a single pot – mimics biblical miracles to absurd effect, signaling that the veneration of political leaders by some church officials is absurd in itself. Memes describing bishops with luxury cars or priests conducting “Orthodox Porn Film Festival” (an outlandishly juxtaposed concept) use shock and the ridiculous to provoke laughter and make a point about alleged clerical indulgence or hypocrisy. This form of grotesque inversion – turning the accepted norms upside down – is a classic satirical method. It underlines Peter Berger’s observation on the comic, in the form of biting satire, representing a destructive intrusion into social reality that can invert norms. By making church figures do or say outrageous things in jokes, creators momentarily invert the social order (priests become fools, patriarchs spout nonsense), thereby demystifying their authority.

Wordplay and Puns

A subtler strategy in some SOC humor is wordplay. Serbian language allows puns that replace one or two letters to alter meaning – for instance, calling the Patriarch “Partijarh” (playing on „patrijarh”, inserting “partija/party”) to imply he serves a political party, or referring to certain bishops with nicknames that riff on their titles (like turning “His Holiness” into “His Wealthiness”), or referring to Patriarch Porfirije as “Profitije” (pointing to his focus on money and profits). Such puns often appear in Twitter jokes or cartoon captions. They rely on shared linguistic context for the audience to catch the double meaning.

Satirical Framing and Juxtaposition

Many jokes set up a scenario that contrasts ideal vs. reality. A common structure is to cite a lofty Christian principle or biblical quote, then append a contrasting punchline about the Church’s behavior. For instance: “Love thy neighbor as thyself – unless he’s different, says an SOC spokesperson” – a fictitious quote that frames the Church as failing its own teachings on love and tolerance. Another meme showed two panels: one of Jesus driving merchants out of the temple, and another of a modern bishop welcoming politicians into church – a visual juxtaposition that wordlessly comments on hypocrisy. This frame-switching technique is effective on social media where images speak quickly.

In terms of content structure, many satirical pieces begin by mirroring official discourse then gradually descend into satire. The reader or viewer initially might think it is real (for a few seconds) until the exaggeration becomes apparent. This structure heightens the humor by playing on the fine line between reality and farce – which in Serbia’s tumultuous context can sometimes be thin. As veteran cartoonist Corax noted: “our political scene is itself a caricature... everything is so absurd, you can hardly make it more absurd” (Sejdinović, 2020). Satirists leverage that by crafting content that is not too far from the truth, until it veers into comedic exaggeration.

Crucially, even as these jokes employ ridicule, they rarely attack faith or Orthodoxy as a religion per se. The satire is almost always aimed at the people, policies, and institutional behavior of the SOC, not at the core tenets of Orthodox Christianity. Orthodox Christianity as such is never contested or ridiculed – mocking the Church officials and their policies is often based on the very values they emphatically employ in their rhetoric. In other words, the humor holds church leaders to the standards they profess (Christian charity, humility, etc.), rather than mocking the beliefs themselves. This distinction in content keeps much of the satire in the realm of social and political critique, rather than religious blasphemy – although devout traditionalists might not see a difference, the intent of the humorists is to lampoon human failings and institutional power, not the sacred beliefs.

Social Functions of SOC Humor in Serbia

Humor targeting the SOC serves several social functions in contemporary Serbian society. It operates as a form of social critique and resistance, a means of community-building among like-minded secularists, and a symbolic release valve for tensions – all while reinforcing certain cultural narratives about the Church.

A Tool of Social Critique and Accountability

In a society where the Church holds significant influence, humor has emerged as a popular tool to question and “talk back” to authority. Jokes reveal prevalent social, cultural and political attitudes and moods and satire can spotlight issues that official discourse may ignore or gloss over. As Berger puts it, “a good cartoon or joke can be more revealing of a particular social reality than any number of social-scientific treatises” (Berger, 2014, p. 65), effectively serving as a sort of popular sociology. Humor and the comic, thus, operate as auxiliary sociological tools, with comedians being “allies of the sociologist because they ask questions that our everyday routines lead us to forget” (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 10) or implicitly “forbid” such questions to be posed. Humor, “after and besides making us laugh, could incite or even force us to see things from a different perspective” (Tsakona & Popa, 2013, p. 7). There are social scientists who contend that “sociologists without a sense of humor will never be able to understand the workings of the social world, for humor separates its seemingly seamless joints, making them visible” (Davis, 1979, p. 109).

Jokes about the SOC often carry implicit criticism – whether it is exposing corruption, pointing out misogyny, or condemning political meddling. This comedic critique aligns with the classic notion of humor as a “social corrective”. By laughing at the Church’s foibles, society reinforces the idea of how the Church ought to behave. For instance, widespread ridicule of the Church’s tax-exempt wealth or its opulent lifestyle implicitly calls for reform towards greater modesty and accountability. In this way, humor performs a watchdog function, “punching up” at a powerful institution in a manner accessible to ordinary people. While one joke alone will not change church policy, the cumulative effect of being regularly lampooned signals public disapproval, potentially nudging the SOC to be more cautious or publicly responsive on certain issues (at least to avoid ridicule).

Counter-Hegemonic Resistance (The “Weapon of the Weak”)

From a sociological perspective, mocking the SOC can be seen as a form of resistance by less powerful groups against a hegemonic authority. The SOC occupies a hegemonic position in Serbian cultural life – it often asserts what is “moral” or “traditionally Serbian.” Humor provides a way to subvert that dominance symbolically. Referring to anthropologist Mary Douglas’s theory, official religious rites convey that social patterns are fixed and sacred, whereas “the message of a joke is that they are escapable” (Douglas, 2002, p. 155). In other words, jokes are by nature “anti-rites” that symbolically overturn hierarchy and dogma, suggesting

that the established order (the Church's authority, in this case) is not invincible or beyond question. By caricaturing a bishop or making the Patriarch the butt of a joke, the humor momentarily “melts away the harsh contours of social reality”, allowing people to imagine an alternative social order where the mighty are humbled. This is akin to what anthropologist James C. Scott called the “weapons of the weak” – subtle, everyday forms of resistance that the powerless use to cope with domination. Humor, when counter-hegemonic, is the symbolic weapon of the weak – it enables citizens who feel the Church is too influential (or aligned with an unaccountable government) to push back through satire since direct confrontation might be ineffective or risky.

In post-socialist Serbia, where formal censorship is lower than it was in “communism”, words and jokes can fly freely – yet systemic change is slow, leading some to wryly note that nowadays you can think, say or write whatever you want, without any effect. In that light, the humor serves as *a safe outlet for dissent*: it will not topple the Church's power, but it allows dissident voices to be heard and shared widely in society. This function is evident during events like celebrating St. Sava as the “first Serbian enlightener” – satirical drawings parodying him often appear, signaling resistance to Church's authority in the matters of education. While the immediate political impact is limited, such humor keeps an undercurrent of skepticism alive in the public sphere.

Figure 14

Fake children's drawings of Saint Sava (“playing poker with his Serbs”; “investing in crypto currency”; “handing over the decision to dismiss the principal of the elementary school Aleksa Šantić in Sečanj”¹⁰)



¹⁰ Reference to the elementary school principal who in January 2023 imposed a ban on performing a religious ritual in a state school as a part of the celebration of St. Sava. The Minister of Education, against the principle of secularism, supported the clerical glorification of a church saint as a part of the presumably lay honoring of an educator and the first Serbian enlightener. For more details see: Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023.

Community Building and Solidarity

Sharing a laugh at the SOC's expense can also foster a sense of camaraderie among secular or "liberal" segments of Serbian society. In a country where attitudes toward the Church vary from deeply devout to strongly critical, these jokes act as a social filter – those who "get it" and find it funny are often those who share similar views and criticisms of the Church. By circulating memes that rely on shared values (like valuing democracy, pluralism, or modern lifestyle) and shared background knowledge (awareness of Church scandals or political ties), individuals create an in-group of like-minded peers. Sociologists note that humor often demarcates group symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Lamont, Pendergrass & Pachucki, 2015). Laughing at the same jokes implies a common perspective and group belonging: "a successful joke marks social boundaries. The ones who are laughing are visibly 'in on the joke', those who do not join in are exposed as outsiders: they do not belong" (Kuipers, 2022, p. 4). Allusions in SOC satire – for example, referencing a known corrupt tycoon who got a church accolade – appeal to shared values and beliefs, thus contributing to in-group cohesion and reinforcement of symbolic boundaries: "Through laughter and humor the group is united together against the target of the mockery" (Mascha, 2008, p. 83). Within social media comment threads, one can see users bonding over these jabs, often building on each other's jokes in a show of collective creativity. This solidarity has a reinforcing effect: it bolsters the collective narrative that "we are the ones who see through the hypocrisy," unlike the out-group (perceived as blindly religious or nationalist followers). Essentially, humor becomes a way for secular-oriented Serbs to assert their identity. It says, in effect, "we share a modern, irreverent outlook that questions authority," and that message strengthens the group's cultural confidence and solidarity.

Reinforcing Cultural Narratives and Stereotypes

While humor can challenge authority, it can simultaneously reinforce certain existing cultural narratives. Many jokes about the SOC draw on longstanding stereotypes – the "fat priest" obsessed with money, the "fire-and-brimstone bishop" who hates progress, etc. By invoking them, today's memes tap into a collective memory and "confirm" what people already suspect about the Church. Humorous discourse is often based on stereotypes which are already part of the background knowledge of the community. For example, depicting clergy as bumbling or avaricious aligns with a traditional irreverence in Serbian culture (Serbs historically have a rich tradition of aphorisms and jokes that spare no institution). The effect is that these jokes do not necessarily change minds; rather, they amplify pre-existing cynicism or distrust toward the SOC among the population predisposed to view it skeptically. In that sense, humor serves to normalize critique of the Church – making it acceptable, even routine, to laugh at the "untouchable clergy". This can gradually erode the aura of unquestionable respect that surrounded the Church, replacing it with a more skeptical cultural narrative. However, it can also deepen the rift between different segments of society: those who are amused may double down on seeing

the Church as corrupt and backwards, while those offended might feel the Church is under unfair attack. Thus, humor bolsters each side's narrative – the secular critique and the traditionalist counter-critique – contributing to the ongoing cultural struggle.

Emotional Relief and Coping

On a psychological level, satire provides ordinary citizens a cathartic release. Faced with frustration over issues like church interference in politics or scandals, people can feel powerless. Making jokes about it offers a form of relief – it is a way to vent and reduce the frustration through laughter. The SOC is a serious authority, but humor strips it of some seriousness, which can be comforting. As Berger, following Douglas, describes the joker as a “kind of minor magician” who “waves his magic wand and, at least for a moment, the harsh contours of social reality melt away and imagination can fill the resulting empty space” (Berger, 2014, p. 68). In those moments of laughter, the strictures of social life – the need to publicly respect religious authority – are loosened. This helps individuals cope with any sense of oppression or disagreement. Particularly during crises (like the pandemic or political turmoil), humorous takes on the Church's stance (e.g., memes about the “holy spoon” during COVID) helped people deal with fear and anger by laughing instead of despairing. It is a form of “gallows humor” in some cases, allowing critique of dangerous decisions (like refusing to modify communion) in a digestible way.

Reception and Broader Social Context

Humor about the SOC does not occur in a vacuum – its impact and permissibility are shaped by how different social groups and institutions receive it. Reactions to this satire vary widely in Serbia, reflecting the country's cultural and ideological divides.

Secular-oriented Serbians, including a large portion of urban youth, activists, and intellectuals, generally receive SOC humor enthusiastically. They view it as a healthy critique of an institution they feel wields too much conservative influence. For them, sharing a cutting SOC meme or laughing at a Kesić monologue about the Patriarch's latest political statement is almost an act of affirmation – it signals alignment with values of free expression, modernity, and holding power to account. Many in this group argue that the Church, by engaging in public affairs, earns scrutiny and satire like any political body. Thus, they defend such humor as legitimate. In liberal media outlets and online forums, one finds support for cartoonists and comedians when their religious satire sparks controversy. For example, when a bold caricature or a provocative skit draws ire from conservatives, secular commentators typically uphold the joker's right to criticize, framing the humor as part of free speech and necessary social critique. In short, among secularists, this humor is seen as speaking truth to power and reflecting popular sentiment, thus largely positive and even important.

In contrast, more conservative and religious segments of society often react negatively to ridiculing the SOC. Devout Orthodox believers may feel that mocking

church leaders or rituals is offensive and blasphemous, even if the jokes stop short of heresy. For them, the SOC is intertwined with Serbian national identity and tradition, so an attack on the Church can feel like an attack on “Serbdom” itself. It is not uncommon to see pro-church individuals denounce satirists as “haters of the Church” or morally lost “westernized” elements. Some go so far as to label sharp caricatures of bishops as anti-Serbian propaganda or hate speech against Orthodox Christians. Church officials occasionally respond defensively to ridicule. While the SOC as an institution does not sue comedians or ban cartoons (since, legally, Serbia does not have anti-blasphemy laws)¹¹, they do issue statements when they feel lines are crossed (PT Балкан, 2025; Деврња, 2025). These reactions show that the SOC’s establishment and its supporters are sensitive to satire, often viewing it not as constructive criticism but as part of a broader anti-traditional trend. In the eyes of traditionalists, such humor can reinforce their perception that faith is under siege in a secularizing world, sometimes prompting a rally-around-the-church effect. Nonetheless, outright attempts to censor this humor have been limited – instead, the common strategy is public condemnation and social pressure. In sum, the reception among church loyalists is largely negative and characterized by efforts to discredit the humor as disrespectful or beyond the pale.

Within Political Circles

Political entities in Serbia have mixed responses to SOC-focused humor, often depending on their alignment with the Church. The ruling government (led by President Vučić and the SNS party in recent years) tends to ally with the SOC, so its members are quick to defend the Church or condemn extreme satire, as noted above. They may accuse satirists of sowing division or insulting the nation’s heritage. However, the government also treads carefully – outright censorship of religious satire could backfire internationally and domestically. Thus, officials sometimes join the rhetorical pushback but stop short of legal measures. On the other hand, opposition politicians and independent media often amplify the satire. They share cartoons or jokes that align with their criticism of the regime-SOC nexus. For example, when *Njuz.net* published the parody about the Church urging faith in

¹¹ “Legally, the prohibition of blasphemy in any form has not existed at any time in the recent history of Serbia – or even in the older one, given that even *Dušan’s Code* only mentions offences such as cursing the bishop (but not God), destroying the church (but not showing disrespect), and ‘heresies’ such as “Latin” and “Bogomil” (but unquestionably primarily in the sense of a potential danger to the government). It would be difficult to list offences that would resemble sacrilege in the sense of an impure mixture that could be legally sanctioned. The first Constitution of modern Serbia, adopted on Sretenje (Feast of the Holy Encounter) in 1835, since it was written according to the model of the French and Belgian ones, did not have any similar provisions at all. Blasphemy and sacrilege in a symbolic sense were not criminal offences even at a time when the Kingdom of Serbia, and later Yugoslavia, had an official, or privileged, church. Article 317 of the current Criminal Code, in this aspect inherited from the socialist era, prohibits incitement to national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance, and this refers to the real possibility of provoking the anger of the majority against members of one group, which could lead to violence. In short, there is no experience or tradition, ancient or recent, of criminal liability for sacrilege on the territory of Serbia” (Igrutinović, 2023: 45-46; author’s translation).

Vučić, opposition-leaning social media loudly spread it, implicitly using humor to underscore their argument that the regime exploits the Church's authority. In this way, humor becomes a proxy battleground for politics. It is noteworthy that satirists themselves (such as Kesić or the *Njuz.net* team) often insist on political independence – they skewer all sides – but their SOC jokes are certainly used by various actors to bolster political narratives. Another institution to consider is the media: liberal outlets give space to this humor, while pro-government tabloids occasionally attack the comedians. Overall, in the political sphere, SOC humor is both a barometer of sentiment (if jokes gain traction, it signals popular discontent on an issue) and a tool wielded in discourse by different factions.

Conclusion

In summary, the reception of humor about the SOC mirrors Serbia's cultural fault lines. What is satire and fair critique to some is sacrilege and hate to others. This dynamic means the humor itself becomes a topic of discussion, raising questions about the role of the Church and the boundaries of free expression.

Society has largely agreed that satirizing the Church is within the realm of free expression (no serious calls for blasphemy laws or censorship have advanced), but society is also aware that the Church's real influence remains intact despite the jokes. In talk shows and online debates, one often hears a note of cynicism: humor is the only recourse left when formal institutions fail to address an issue. Public reception of the humor can sometimes be meta-analytical: people joke about how they have to joke to be heard.

Through memes, satirical news, cartoons, and comedy sketches, Serbians have voiced critiques of the SOC's perceived greed, hypocrisy, political ties, and dogmatism in a form both accessible and entertaining. The thematic patterns – from poking fun at bishops' wealth to parodying the Church's nationalist zeal – underscore an ongoing negotiation of the Church's authority. Rhetorically, this humor leverages irony, parody, and exaggeration to cleverly turn the Church's own symbolism against itself, stripping away its aura of trustworthiness.

Socially, the act of mocking the SOC serves as a safety valve and a mirror: a safety valve for citizens to vent discontent with an influential institution, and a mirror reflecting society's expectations (and disappointments) of that institution. It operates as a form of soft resistance, chipping at an ideological hegemony with the tools of laughter. In doing so, it fosters solidarity among those who share the skepticism and contributes to an irreverent counter-narrative in Serbian culture – one that says no authority, however sacrosanct, is above question or satire.

However, the power of this humor has its limits. The humor's immediate effect is more cultural or symbolic than concrete: it democratizes criticism and reminds leaders that their legitimacy can be punctured by a punchline. "Jokes are a thermometer, not a thermostat; they provide an indication of what is happening in a society, but they do not feed back into and change or reinforce the social processes that generated them in

any important way” (Davies, 2011, p. 248). Nevertheless, over time joking can slowly shift the *Overton window* of what is expected from the Church. Yet, it is also true that humor can let off pressure that might otherwise build into direct action – a double-edged sword wherein jokes substitute for more tangible demands.

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HUMOR PROTIV HEGEMONIJE: IRONIJA, SATIRA I PARODIJA USMERENE NA SRPSKU PRAVOSLAVNU CRKVVU

Miloš Jovanović

Departman za sociologiju, Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Nišu, Srbija

Sažetak

Rad se bavi analizom tumačenja i „uokvirivanja” Srpske pravoslavne crkve u javno dostupnim humorističkim sadržajima.

Crkva u savremenom srpskom društvu je organizacija sa značajnim ugledom među građanima, koji u nju imaju veliko poverenje. Ona uživa brojne privilegije i koristi

priličnu količinu resursa koje joj obezbeđuje politička oligarhija. Crkva zauzima istaknuto mesto u javnom životu savremene Srbije, kako kroz formalno uključivanje sveštenstva i crkvenih predstavnika u rad svetovnih institucija, tako i kroz neformalnu svakodnevnu praksu građana. Hegemoni položaj Srpske pravoslavne crkve, kao (samo)proglašene vodeće moralne i duhovne organizacije, čini je posebno pogodnom metom za komično tretiranje kroz upotrebu ironije, satire i parodije.

Analiza gorepomenutih humorističkih sadržaja konceptualno se oslanja na Gramšijeva razmatranja hegemonije i konstruktivistički pristup humoru Pitera Bergera. Koristeći netnografiju kao metod za prikupljanje podataka i tematsku analizu za njihovu interpretaciju, studija ukazuje na delegitimišući potencijal humora u društvenim borbama. Analizirani i interpretirani podaci se sastoje od vizuelnih i tekstualnih humorističkih sadržaja koji su se pojavljivali kao reakcija na istupe Crkve u javnosti. Najčešće su tematizovani: „ispadi“, „neprimereno“ ponašanje, „problematične“ izjave i stavovi crkvenih velikodostojnika, kao i prakse predstavnika Crkve koje su viđene kao suprotstavljene hrišćanskom učenju i moralu koje Crkva propoveda (materijalna raskoš, moralizovanje i mešanje u privatni život ljudi, agresivni ispadi, podrška dezavuisanim političarima, sujeverje, seksualno zlostavljanje i drugi skandali).

Ključne reči: Srpska pravoslavna crkva, hegemonija, humor, simbolička borba, netnografija, tematska analiza.

RECEIVED: 04.04.2025.

ACCEPTED: 12.04.2025.

milos.jovanovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs