

L'umorismo tra sacro e profano: attualità e prospettive di ricerca

a cura di Cristina Pennarola e Vincenzo Rapone

Federico II University Press



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L'umorismo tra sacro e profano : attualità e prospettive di ricerca / a cura di Cristina Pennarola e Vincenzo Rapone. – Napoli : FedOAPress, 2026. – 204 p. ; 24 cm. – (Scuola di Scienze Umane e Sociali. Quaderni ; 43).

Accesso alla versione elettronica: <http://www.fedoabooks.unina.it>

ISBN: 978-88-6887-423-0

DOI: 10.6093/978-88-6887-423-0

Online ISSN della collana: 2499-4774

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Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II
Centro di Ateneo per le Biblioteche “Roberto Pettorino”
Piazza Bellini 59-60
80138 Napoli, Italy
<http://www.fedoapress.unina.it/>

Published in Italy

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Queering God: Humour, Iconicity, and the Sacred

*Giuseppe Balirano**

1. *Defining Queer: Theory, Disruption, Genealogy*

Once confined within the domain of theology and institutional ritual, the figure of God has over the years entered the unruly circuits of popular culture, only to be reshaped, stylised, and, at times, also queered. Indeed, in contemporary anglophone media, the Almighty no longer speaks exclusively in solemn tones or masculine grammar; the spiritual dimension may now materialise by means of camp iconicity, a non-binary avatar, or an irreverent meme at once sacred and profane, transcendent and immanent, solemn and parodic. These hybrid representations appear to destabilise inherited belief systems, foregrounding the performative dimensions of religious authority itself. Thus, what is at stake is not merely a politics of representation, but a radical reconfiguration of the intersections between power, gender, and belief within digital and post-secular imaginaries.

This paper, albeit grounded in English linguistics, inevitably draws upon interdisciplinary premises informed by queer theory in cultural studies. The aim of this investigation is to explore how hegemonic conceptions of the sacred are destabilised through fluid and non-conforming gendered embodiments, and to consider how humour, rather than trivialising the sacred, operates as a semiotic strategy of cultural dissidence or ideological displacement. In dialogue with the volume's interdisciplinary concern with humour as a site where the sacred and the profane intersect, this chapter approaches queer media representations of divinity as a contemporary case through which such tensions become especially visible.

A preliminary, and I believe essential, point of entry into this study lies in the semantic and discursive function of the term *queer*. Within the framework

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of the present discussion, queer is regarded as a fluid and polysemic loanword that deliberately resists fixed or essentialist definitions. Rather than anchoring itself in a stable identity or taxonomy, it operates as a critical concept through which social normativities, gender identities, and sexual orientations are questioned and often destabilised. In this sense, queer functions less as a category and more as a vector of disruption, «an identity without an essence», defined precisely as «whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant»¹. Within such semantically and politically volatile terrain, I posit that the interesting and underexplored intersection of queer studies, humour, and religious discourse may constitute a complex and contentious site of inquiry. This claim finds support in Don Kulick's assertion that engaging with such material often provokes discomfort by unsettling domains strategically disavowed in dominant discourses². Similarly, Milani's reflections on queer masculinities underscore how non-normative subjectivities both resist and are absorbed by neoliberal cultural formations, an ambivalence that is intensified when queerness engages the sacred through humour³. These interventions serve to illuminate the uneasy visibility of queerness in contemporary discourse, especially when it disrupts hegemonic religious or moral logic.

Expanding upon these theoretical trajectories, the analysis moves toward a reconsideration of the sacred as a culturally and ideologically contested terrain. Rather than assuming the divine as a stable or transcendent entity, the discussion probes how queer aesthetics and humour may complicate, subvert, or reorient dominant religious imaginaries. This interpretive approach resonates with the work of Lidia Curti, whose precious contributions to cultural and feminist studies have persistently challenged fixed notions of identity and representation. Curti underscores that both identity and genre are not static or self-contained categories but are shaped by ongoing and unfinished processes⁴. Her work persistently challenges fixed notions of representation, encouraging critical crossings between disciplines, epistemologies, and symbolic orders. Within this same constellation of fluid and transgressive semiotics, the notion of *queer icons* offers pertinent insight⁵. Drawing on the multi-

¹ D.M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, Oxford, 1995, p. 62.

² D. Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, Chicago, 2003, p. 31.

³ T.M. Milani, *Queering the media: Power, identity and politics*, in *Language and Citizenship*, edited by T.M. Milani, London, 2018, pp. 105–125.

⁴ L. Curti, *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation*, London, 1992.

⁵ G. Balirano, *Of rainbow unicorns: The role of bonding queer icons in contemporary LGBTQ+ re-positionings*, in «Ocula. Occhi sul mondo contemporaneo», 21-22, 2020, pp. 46–60.

modal affordances of camp and stylised excess, Balirano conceptualises queer icons not merely as figures of gender dissidence, but as affective and cultural condensations that facilitate communal bonding and ideological subversion⁶. This matrix operates within the same logic of resignification that characterises Milani's account of queer subjectivities in neoliberal cultural terrains, marked by tensions between visibility and co-optation, as well as Curti's insistence on the instability of symbolic systems and the political urgency of aesthetic disobedience.

Consequently, the religious figures (and here 'figures' refers to culturally mediated representations or embodiments of the divine) explored in this study operate precisely along these lines: once re-coded through humour, parody, and queer aesthetics, they become queer icons in their own right; founding nodes where irreverence and devotion, identity and transcendence, satire and affect intersect in ways that challenge and reframe both the cultural grammar of the sacred and normative understandings of gender.

The discursive reimagining of God through queer and parodic representations finds significant antecedents in theological discourse itself. Marcella Althaus-Reid's pioneering work, particularly *The Queer God*, already advanced a radical rethinking of Christian theology⁷. Althaus-Reid deconstructs the figure of God through the very prism of queer theory, contesting the patriarchal and binary representations that have traditionally shaped the sacred. She articulates the notion of a queer God, a transcendent figure that resists theological hierarchies and dichotomies such as sacred/profane and male/female, offering a vision of godliness instead as fluid, dynamic, and receptive to non-conformity and difference⁸. In Althaus-Reid's view, rather than a fixed place of order, transcendence therefore becomes a space of continuous metamorphosis and productive disorder⁹.

This theological reorientation finds further elaboration in the more recent *Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Mona West and Robert E. Shore-Goss¹⁰. The volume offers an innovative and critically engaged rereading of biblical texts through feminist, queer, and deconstructive approaches. Its contributors advocate for an interpretive tool that acknowledges and celebrates the diver-

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ M. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, London, 2003.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ M. West – R.E. Shore-Goss (eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary*, London, 2013.

sity of human experience, including sexual and gendered experience, while challenging patriarchal and binary models of representation. Within this interpretative model, the transcendent is no longer construed as an abstract, immutable authority, but instead embodied, material, and performative: a God moulded by human struggle through acts of resistance, and in the lived reality of justice-seeking bodies.

This reframing of God's image as incarnate and agentive also resonates with contemporary Italian contributions to queer spirituality, most notably in Michela Murgia's *God Save the Queer*¹¹. While the reference to Murgia might appear parochial at first glance, it is, in fact, a meaningful inclusion, given that this volume originates within the Italian cultural and intellectual context. Her reflections offer a locally grounded yet widely resonant vision of an inclusive, non-binary queer divinity that gently unsettles the normative structures of institutional religion. For Murgia, spirituality becomes a site for negotiating identity, faith, and belonging beyond traditional views¹². Far from being a marginal or subversive gesture, queering God stands as a critical epistemology, one that makes visible the cultural and ideological processes through which the sacred is mediated. Against this backdrop, the religious iconography cannot but appear as queer, destabilising heteronormative theologies, disidentifying from patriarchal authority, and opening alternative configurations of transcendence rooted in resistance, fluidity, and affiliation. The queer spiritual gesture, whether theological, performative, or poetic, enacts precisely that crossing of boundaries and unsettling of epistemologies that Curti so compellingly placed at the heart of cultural inquiry¹³. It is an act of traversal, across genres, disciplines, affects, and identities, that refuses closure and embraces hybridity as both a method and mode of being. Hence, queerness is not an identity to be affirmed or denied, but a practice of continual displacement: a movement that dissolves binaries, reclaims impurity, and refigures the sacred as an ongoing space of contestation and reinvention.

Humour, in this context, becomes a vital discursive force: irreverent yet affirmative, it disorients religious orthodoxy while affirming queer inhabitation of the sacred. It operates not only as a mode of critique, but as a performative strategy for survival, a mechanism of world-building through contradiction

¹¹ M. Murgia, *God Save the Queer*, Torino, 2022.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Curti, *Female Stories, Female Bodies* cit.

and excess. Camp laughter, ironic citation, and parodic embodiment are not marginal embellishments of queer theology but its very grammar, gestures that render visible the constructedness of holiness and the performativity of all belief systems.

In this way, the spiritual becomes not the antithesis of the profane, but its refracted twin, shimmering through drag rituals, televisual icons, and collective memory. What emerges is a theology of immanence and flux, fragile, flamboyant, and fiercely resistant, that queers not only God but the conditions under which the divine can be imagined, invoked, and inhabited.

2. *Queering the Sacred through Humour and Iconicity*

In today's interconnected and media-saturated world, queerness is articulated through a wide range of cultural forms that destabilise heteronormative religious iconography. These representations frequently engage humour and irony, not merely as rhetorical flourishes, but as discursive devices that expose the contradictions of normative belief systems and suggest alternative modes and models of spiritual expression. Viewed from this perspective, queerness is not simply applied to the sacred; it constitutes the very grammar through which the mystical dimension becomes intelligible, shaping the ways in which the sacred is perceived, narrated, and inhabited. A queer gaze, informed by this epistemological orientation, reveals the sacred as inherently unstable, continuously slipping away from doctrinal fixity and rigid identity categories. God is therefore not located outside queerness, but within it, relational and performative, open to being rescripted through registers that are irreverent, affective, and fluid.

Among the many interpretative strategies employed in this context, humour emerges as a particularly effective strategy. Its function is not merely ornamental or entertaining; rather, humour becomes a mode of critical engagement that enables the rearticulation of religious symbols and narratives. In Freudian terms, humour operates as a form of psychic release that allows the subject to confront social taboos and anxieties in a displaced, indirect manner¹⁴. In particular, Freud distinguishes between tendentious jokes, which car-

¹⁴ S. Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (1905), transl. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, edited by J. Strachey, New York, 1960.

ry a latent aim, such as aggression, exposure, or subversion, while allowing for the expression of socially unacceptable or repressed ideas in a disguised, playful form; and non-tendentious jokes, which rely primarily on formal features like wordplay, incongruity, or wit. Freud argues that while jokes combining tendentious and non-tendentious elements tend to produce the greatest comic effect, it is the tendentious joke that leaves a more lasting impression, precisely because it taps into deeply rooted cultural values and repressed content¹⁵. Humour, in this sense, becomes a site of psychic conflict, where identification and condemnation can coexist. As theorists such as Douglas¹⁶, Attardo¹⁷, and Oring¹⁸ have noted, comic pleasure often emerges not from moral approval but from a repressed recognition: although we may outwardly condemn the object of the joke's transgression, we laugh precisely because we unconsciously identify with the violation of social norms it stages. This tension between moral distancing and psychic proximity is central to the laughter elicited by queer representations of God. On the one hand, the figure of God is culturally encoded with heteronormative, patriarchal authority, making it an object of both reverence and social identification. On the other, the queering of this figure confronts us with desires or identifications that are socially forbidden. The laughter, then, functions as a defensive release, allowing the repressed to emerge momentarily under the veil of humour. It is this ambivalent dynamic, both distancing from and identifying with a queer God, that grants such representations their subversive affective power.

In the context of queer spiritual discourse, humour often takes a tendentious form, enabling irreverent critiques of religious orthodoxy and the articulation of dissident spiritual subjectivities. In queer engagements with the sacred, this often involves the release of affective tensions linked to shame, desire, or ambivalence toward religious authority, energies typically constrained by theological or moral doctrine. By permitting the temporary suspension of repression, humour creates a space where forbidden meanings can surface, often cloaked in laughter, and thus made more palatable yet, paradoxically, more potent.

From a linguistic and pragmatic standpoint, as theorised by Attardo¹⁹, humour is grounded in incongruity, that is, the violation of expectations at the

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ M. Douglas, *The social control of cognition: Some factors in joke perception*, in «Man», 3, 3, 1968, pp. 361–376.

¹⁷ S. Attardo, *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*, Berlin, 2001.

¹⁸ E. Oring, *Engaging Humor*, Urbana and Chicago, 2003.

¹⁹ S. Attardo, *The Linguistics of Humor: An Introduction*, Oxford, 2020, and cf. Attardo, *Humorous Texts* cit.

level of meaning, logic, or cultural norms. The humour that arises in queer readings of the sacred often hinges on semantic and ideological clashes: the sacred and the profane, reverence and parody, orthodoxy and excess. This incongruity produces a rupture in cognitive interpretation, eliciting laughter while simultaneously exposing the contingent and constructed nature of theological narratives. In this light, humour functions not only as a tool of resistance, but also as a generative force that enables new affective and epistemological relationships with the sacred.

While humour plays a central role in disorienting and re-signifying religious narratives, other forms of aesthetic revisitation, such as camp, spectacle, and emotional intensification, also contribute to the queer rewriting of the sacred. Religious figures, or even God as a character, are often performed through irony in contemporary Anglo-American film and television, revealing the distance between institutional sacrality and the lived realities of suffering, doubt, and existential ambiguity. Films such as *Life of Brian* (1979), *Dogma* (1999), and *Bruce Almighty* (2003), along with TV series like *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994–2020), *Fleabag* (2016–2019), and *Good Omens* (2019, 2023), employ humour not only to parody religious authority, but also to reimagine the metaphysical figure as fallible, compassionate, and unexpectedly human. These performances blur the boundaries between reverence and irreverence, foregrounding the affective, unstable, and, at times, queer dimensions of spiritual experience, and elevating certain figures to the status of cultural icons through whom alternative, often subversive, imaginaries of the sacred are articulated. What enables this symbolic elevation is not only their visual power, but also the discursive mechanisms through which they are re-signified.

An essential element that facilitates this discursive slippage from the sacred to the profane is the concept of the cultural icon. As Fiorentino observes²⁰, cultural icons become embedded in a shared symbolic repertoire that underpins both language and discourse. Detached from their original referents, these icons circulate across diverse media and ideological landscapes, acquiring new meanings through processes of resemiotisation and remediation. Their symbolic malleability allows them to be invested with fresh affective, political, and spiritual resonances. In this process, humour may play a crucial role not as a mere rhetorical accessory, but as a generative force in the construction of queer iconicity. By exaggerating, displacing, or parodically recontextualis-

²⁰ D. Fiorentino, *Icone della postmodernità*, Roma, 2009, p. 9.

ing sacred figures, humour accentuates their symbolic charge and amplifies their visibility. Through irony, stylisation, and semantic excess, it transforms canonical representations into queer icons, enabling them to cross cultural boundaries and inhabit new ideological terrains. Especially in queer cultural production, humour inflects iconicity with irreverence and wit, allowing sacred figures to be reimagined in playful yet politically charged ways.

Within the religious sphere, one of the most enduring and culturally overdetermined figures is Saint Sebastian, whose iconographic repetition across centuries has sedimented a complex network of symbolic associations. His youthful, semi-naked, pierced body has been subjected to extensive visual rearticulation, especially in queer cultural contexts, where it becomes a site of contested meaning. Far from representing a straightforward inversion of Christian martyrdom, the queer appropriation of Sebastian operates as a form of subversion in the sense conveyed within cultural studies. It does not simply reverse dominant codes of sanctity and suffering, but displaces them, opening unstable and ambivalent interpretive spaces. As scholars such as Richard Kaye²¹ and Jonathan Katz²² have shown, the figure of Sebastian has long functioned as a queer visual allegory of desire, persecution, and endurance; it becomes an aesthetic node through which male same-sex eroticism could be expressed within the limits imposed by a heteronormative and often homophobic culture.

It is precisely in this context that Lidia Curti's work proves invaluable. Her call to traverse the boundaries of gender, language, and symbolic systems offers an ideal framework through which to read the contemporary reimagining of Saint Sebastian. Rather than being interpreted as a merely transgressive gesture, the queering of Sebastian becomes a performative practice, one that dislocates dominant signifiers and opens new avenues for meaning. His iconography, vulnerable, erotic, pierced, has been reappropriated in queer cultural contexts, not as inversion but as strategic subversion, enabling forms of dissident identification. In this view, the sacred is not negated, but reoccupied, its visual and affective grammars redirected toward dissident forms of identification. Queer iconicity, rather than signalling a stable identity position, becomes a mobile and unstable site of meaning that draws its power from

²¹ R.A. Kaye, 'Determined Raptures': *St. Sebastian and The Victorian Discourse of Decadence*, in «Victorian Literature and Culture», 27, 1, 1999, pp. 269–303.

²² J. Katz, *The silent camp: queer resistance and the rise of Pop Art*, in *Visions of a Future: Art and Art History in Changing Contexts*, edited by K. Imesch – H.-J. Heusser, Zurich, 2004, pp. 147–158.

repetition, circulation, and affective excess. It is within this cultural logic that humour plays a strategic and transformative role. The stylised theatricality often associated with Sebastian's contemporary representations, particularly in camp aesthetics, reframes suffering through irony and exaggeration. This mode of humorous re-signification does not simply ridicule the sacred; it engages it critically, revealing the fragility of theological narratives and exposing the labour of their performative maintenance. Such a form of humour, saturated with affect and contradiction, operates as a performative contradiction in the Butlerian sense, reworking images that once conveyed sanctity into expressions of queer pleasure and defiant endurance.

The same dynamics are at play in more recent cultural figures such as Conchita Wurst, the Austrian drag performer and 2014 Eurovision Song Contest winner whose visual resemblance to traditional depictions of Christ is deliberately amplified. Conchita's embodiment of gender non-conformity functions not as parody in a reductive sense, but as a queer intervention into sacred visibility; it reclaims the space of spiritual authority as open to negotiation, theatricality, and embodied ambiguity. These reappropriations resonate with what José Esteban Muñoz²³ defines as *disidentification*, a practice through which minoritarian subjects engage with dominant cultural codes in order to rework them from within. Rather than rejecting the sacred, these queer icons inhabit its symbolic architecture and reorient it towards alternative possibilities of affiliation, desire, and resistance. Ultimately, the subversive potential of these figures is reinforced by their ability to generate semantic and aesthetic incongruity.

As Attardo's *General Theory of Verbal Humor* suggests²⁴, humour emerges from the violation of expectations and the productive friction between incompatible codes. In queer sacred reinterpretations, incongruity arises from the tension between the assumed solemnity of godly presence and the irreverent, fluid embodiments that challenge it. This rupture produces more than laughter. It enables a new form of seeing, one that reveals the ideological constructedness of religious iconography while affirming the creative power of queer imagination. This is the case, for instance, of Cher's iconic performance of spiritual power in queer representations, where the sacred is neither rejected nor simply caricatured.

²³ J.E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York, 2009.

²⁴ Attardo, *The Linguistics of Humor* cit.

Cher, the American singer, actress, and enduring pop culture icon, has long been celebrated for her theatrical style, gender play, and commanding presence. As a queer icon, her image parodies the divine while offering a version of godliness that is performative, excessive, and emotionally accessible. Through irony, stylisation, and affective intensity, she reshapes the sacred as a space of queer affiliation, where doctrine gives way to spectacle and resistance is enacted through glamour. Crucially, her persona anticipates many of the visual codes and performative gestures associated with contemporary drag culture, functioning as a culturally legible precursor to the stylised excess and gender transgression now central to queer modes of performing spirituality. This intersection of iconicity and humour gestures toward a broader dynamic in which queerness does not merely reinterpret the sacred but enacts it through aesthetic disobedience and embodied imagination.

A scene from *Will & Grace* (Season 4, Episode 26), where Cher appears as a dream-visiting God to the flamboyant Jack, exemplifies a form of camp theology that fuses parody with reverence. First aired in 2002, this episode is embedded within a series that holds a seminal place in the history of LGBTIQ+ representation on American network television²⁵. *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998–2006; revival 2017–2020) was one of the first mainstream sitcoms to feature openly gay protagonists and played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of queer identities during the post-Ellen era. As Tropiano argues²⁶, the series normalised gay presence on prime-time television while simultaneously relying on the codes of camp and comedy to diffuse potential controversy. Sender similarly notes that the show crafted a 'safe' and palatable form of queerness for mainstream audiences, often privileging consumerism and friendship over political critique, yet nonetheless offering a space for affective identification and visibility²⁷. As Baker observes, the character of Jack McFarland in the series performs a form of exaggerated queerness that both reinforces and undermines normative masculinity²⁸. His flamboyant persona operates within a discursive space that the show constructs as comic yet revealing, what Baker refers to as 'McFairyland', a space of performative excess and stylised queerness that resists the 'True Man' model of acceptable gay identity, represented

²⁵ P. Baker, *Public Discourses of Gay Men*, London & New York, 2005.

²⁶ S. Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV*, New York, 2002.

²⁷ K. Sender, *No hard feelings: Reflexivity and queer affect in the new media landscape*, in *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media*, edited by K. Ross, Hoboken, 2011, pp. 205–225.

²⁸ Baker, *Public Discourses* cit.

by the character of Will Truman. In this light, the *Cher-as-God* scene can be read not merely as a comic spectacle, but as an affirmation of queer spirituality articulated through camp and contradiction.

In the episode in question, the character of Jack therefore embodies a flamboyant performativity that destabilises heteronormative expectations through comic excess and theatrical self-inscription. His scene-opening quip, «Homo, I don't think we're in Barney's anymore», reworks the iconic *Wizard of Oz* line to align spiritual revelation with queer consumer culture. The shift from Kansas to Barney's collapses the boundary between the transcendent and the fabulous, rooting divine encounter in the affective landscape of queer memory and fashion. Cher's appearance as a higher power figure is both ludic and iconic: her exaggerated presence transforms her into a sacred avatar whose humour, theatricality, and surplus of style articulate a distinct form of queer spirituality.

Seen from a *Critical Discourse Analysis* perspective²⁹, the scene functions as a discursive event that destabilises normative mappings of sacredness. In other words, it exemplifies the ideological work of television comedy in naturalising alternative imaginaries of the sacred. Cher's appearance, exaggerated, iconic, irreverent, is not merely comic but an instance of *semiotic condensation*³⁰, where multiple meanings converge in a single figure. Her voice, preceding her body, evokes the biblical motif of divine revelation via sound (cf. 'the voice of God'), recontextualised within queer media discourse. Her persona, saturated with cultural capital and performative excess, is strategically deployed as a site of queerness, glamour, and subversive authority in a single gesture. In this respect, the scene also illustrates how power may be performed through discursive polysemy, a layering of meanings that evokes sacredness, consumer culture, and queer devotion simultaneously through the strategic use of interdiscursivity and ideological ambiguity³¹, a play on multiple meanings that affirms rather than mocks queer spirituality.

Jack's reaction upon seeing Cher, a mixture of shock, reverence, and humour, exemplifies multimodal judgement and affect³², where awe is performed

²⁹ Cf. N. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*, London & New York, 2003.

³⁰ F. Merrell, *Semiotic Foundations: Steps toward an Epistemology of Written Texts*, Bloomington, 1982.

³¹ Cf. N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge, 1992; D. Machin – A. Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (2nd ed.), London, 2023; R. Wodak, *The discourse-historical approach*, in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, edited by R. Wodak – M. Meyer, London, 2001, pp. 63–95.

³² Cf. J.R. Martin – P.R.R. White, *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*, Basingstoke, 2005.

through exaggerated gestures and vocal prosody (i.e., gasping, hands clasped in awe, kneeling), components that can be regarded as prosodic cues in humorous interaction³³. Going back to his exclamation, «Homo, I don't think we're in Barney's anymore», this deploys a form of intertextual humour via script opposition³⁴, contrasting sacred revelation with consumerist banality. Jack's declaration functions as more than a camp punchline; it performs a *stratified semiotic landscape*³⁵, re-mapping the sacred from theological to consumerist terrain, in which Barney's, a luxury department store, is recast as a queer temple of transcendence. This spatial metaphor enacts a *sociolinguistic reterritorialisation* of holiness, where queer identity and divine encounter are saturated through symbolic geography. Such a moment illustrates how spatial language is indexically loaded: 'Barney's' evokes not just a place, but an ideological complex embodying elitism, queer taste, and consumer devotion, which are here reoriented toward spiritual signification. In this sense, the humour is not merely situational but ideological, embedded in the layered revaluation of space, identity, and desire. This scene thus exemplifies Curti's conception of queerness not as a fixed identity, but as *a practice of continual displacement*. Notably, the sequence opens with Jack awakening and indirectly asking, «Where am I?», a moment that immediately foregrounds spatial dislocation. His question is not simply comedic, but structurally significant: it introduces a shift from the known coordinates of everyday queer life (i.e., Barney's) into a fantastical, sacred encounter. This displacement, both spatial and symbolic, is central to how queerness is performed in the scene. Barney's is thereby dislodged from its customary meaning and reimagined as a queer paradise, a divine threshold where revelation becomes possible. In this light, the very queerness of the moment lies not only in Jack's flamboyance or Cher's divinity, but in the dislocation of meaning itself, in the scene's refusal to remain grounded in fixed, normative associations of space, identity, or even belief.

This moment of 'comic theophany', therefore, functions not only as parody but as strategic camp theology. Jack's response to the appearance of Cher (i.e., gasping, kneeling and naming her as 'God') reconfigures ritual as performance, devotion as stylised affect, and faith as iconic queerness. It exemplifies

³³ S. Attardo – M.M. Wagner – E. Urios-Aparisi (eds.), *Prosody and Humor*, Amsterdam, 2013.

³⁴ Cf. S. Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Berlin, 1994; cf. V. Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, Dordrecht, 1985.

³⁵ Cf. J. Blommaert, *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge, 2005.

what Fairclough would call interdiscursivity³⁶, blending religious, consumerist, and queer registers. The scene thus enacts a discursive struggle over meaning, in which queer subjectivity, through humour, both claims and queers the sacred.

3. *Performing Divinity: Queer Theologies, Drag Rituals, and Camp Iconoclasm*

Camp-inflected performances of the sacred, as exemplified by *Will & Grace* (1998–2006), *Pose* (2018–2021), *The Righteous Gemstones* (2019–present), and *Our Flag Means Death* (2022–present), do more than provoke laughter; they operate as critical interventions in cultural theology and queer affect. These shows deploy humour, stylisation, and gender play to interrogate religious iconography, destabilise moral orthodoxy, and recode spirituality through queer experience. *Will & Grace*, often credited with bringing gay identity into mainstream American homes³⁷, uses irony and celebrity parody to queer divine figures, while *Pose* reimagines ballroom culture as a sacred ritual space for trans and queer communities. *The Righteous Gemstones* satirises televangelism and religious capitalism, and *Our Flag Means Death* blends queer romance with a parodic, almost mythological reconfiguration of piracy and redemption. In all these cases, the sacred is not discarded but repurposed as a field for aesthetic and affective resistance.

As Susan Sontag first suggested, camp is a mode of aestheticism that transforms style into content, and in queer contexts, it becomes a powerful tool of both survival and subversion³⁸. Scholars such as Fabio Cleto, Moe Meyer, and Pamela Robertson have theorised camp as a queer political practice that challenges heteronormative aesthetics and reclaims marginalised identities³⁹. These performances use humour, stylisation, and excess not merely to mock the sacred but to rewrite it through modes of embodiment and desire that resist doctrinal fixity and invite new forms of spiritual affiliation; they activate powerful forms of cultural and spiritual resistance.

³⁶ N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, London & New York, 1995.

³⁷ K. Battles – W. Hilton-Morrow, *Gay characters in conventional spaces: Will & Grace and the situation comedy genre*, in «Critical Studies in Media Communication», 19, 1, 2002, pp. 87–105.

³⁸ S. Sontag, *Notes on “camp”*, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York, 1964, pp. 275–292.

³⁹ F. Cleto (ed.), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, Michigan, 1999; M. Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, London, 1994; P. Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, Durham, 1996.

Drawing on Sedgwick's theory of queer performativity⁴⁰ and Freud's notion of sublimation⁴¹, these representations articulate a form of sacredness no longer grounded in hierarchical purity, but in shared imperfection, gender fluidity, and collective identification. RuPaul and *RuPaul's Drag Race* epitomise this cultural and spiritual shift. First aired in 2009, *Drag Race* is a reality TV competition in which drag performers are tested across a series of challenges that blend fashion design, comedic improvisation, lip-sync performance, celebrity impersonation, and autobiographical storytelling. While its format borrows from mainstream reality TV, the show has gradually developed into a global platform for queer expression, visibility, and cultural commentary, transforming the aesthetics and politics of drag into a transnational phenomenon.

More than a talent show, *Drag Race* functions as a site of myth-making and symbolic elevation. Contestants are not merely evaluated for their artistry, but are initiated into a pantheon of drag deities, figures who embody resistance, resilience, and excess. The show's language frequently borrows from religious discourse: queens are 'legendary', 'divine', or 'iconic'; eliminated contestants are told to 'sashay away', a ritualistic phrase that combines glamour with judgment, signifying not just exit, but a symbolic fall from grace. Similarly, winners are declared to have achieved 'charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent' (C.U.N.T.), an acronym that, despite its irreverence, functions as a liturgical affirmation of worthiness, echoing the conferral of spiritual or moral virtue. The main stage, framed with grandeur and ceremony, operates as a kind of sacred space where queens are exalted (i.e., judged positively) or excommunicated (i.e., criticised or eliminated), often through a blend of parody and reverence. These elements have become culturally iconic and function as queer liturgical symbols within *Drag Race*'s performative theology. The aesthetic vocabulary of *Drag Race* borrows heavily from camp, theatre, and queer history, producing an affective intensity that elevates the drag queen to a position of symbolic power akin to the sacred. RuPaul, in particular, is often framed as a kind of queer spiritual guide, dispensing aphoristic wisdom, summarised by the closing line of each episode, «If you can't love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else?», to which the contestants collectively respond, «Amen!». This recurring exchange resonates as both a self-help mantra

⁴⁰ E.K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, 2003.

⁴¹ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* cit.

and a moral imperative. Her persona thus embodies what Muñoz might define as *utopian performativity*, a glimpse of alternative futures enacted in the here and now⁴².

The show's iconography has contributed to a new visual theology in queer culture. Drag queens are rendered as secular saints, honoured on votive candles, printed on T-shirts, remixed into TikTok soundbites, and memorialised in fan art. Through such visual and discursive practices, drag performers are no longer marginal figures; they become emblems of queer spirituality, celebrated for their capacity to reimagine the world through performance, transformation, and humour. These drag deities parody religious authority, not through nihilism or mockery, but by exposing the performative labour of sanctity itself; they transform the divine into something immanent and embodied, accessible and adorned, destabilising the binary between sacred and profane. In doing so, *Drag Race* has helped construct a queer sacred imaginary, one that reclaims spirituality as a space of gender transgression, community healing, and affective exuberance. The sacred here is not found in transcendence but in the sequinned pervasiveness of everyday survival. Divine power is not reserved for the few but distributed across glittered bodies that lip-sync for their lives and speak their truths under the studio lights. It is precisely through the exaggerated, ironic, and often humorous dimensions of drag that this re-enchantment becomes possible: a theatrical gesture that both critiques religious orthodoxy and performs queer divinity on its own unapologetic terms.

More recently, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has explicitly attempted to stage a reconciliation between queerness and religion, foregrounding contestants' narratives of faith complicated by trauma, rejection, and spiritual longing. Across multiple seasons and international editions, the show has featured heartfelt confessionals in which drag performers recount their religious upbringings, often within evangelical, Catholic, or Pentecostal communities, and the pain of being cast out due to their gender expression or sexuality. These moments, while deeply moving, are frequently framed within redemptive story arcs that emphasise forgiveness, personal growth, and emotional catharsis. The narrative structure, supported by reality TV conventions, positions these experiences as triumphs of individual resilience rather than indictments of institutional harm. In doing so, the show often displaces systemic critique in favour

⁴² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* cit.

of individual transformation, recasting religious trauma as a personal obstacle to be overcome rather than a product of entrenched institutional power. This framing aligns with broader neoliberal logics of self-making and emotional labour, where healing is privatised and politicised critique is softened through affective storytelling.

One such case appears in Season 10, when contestant Monique Heart recalls her devout Christian upbringing and the spiritual torment she experienced when her queerness was framed as sinful. Her testimony is delivered with humour, punctuated by flamboyant gestures and biblical references, but beneath the laughter lies a profound negotiation of pain, shame, and longing for divine connection. The humour does not trivialise her experience; rather, it becomes a strategy for reclaiming narrative control, transforming suffering into performative agency. Similarly, in *All Stars 4*, Latrice Royale reflects on her role as a 'gospel queen', describing how she incorporates religious imagery and language into her drag persona. Her performances juxtapose church aesthetics with eroticism and camp, disrupting the presumed incompatibility between spirituality and queer sexuality and effectively reworking spiritual signifiers into queer forms of affirmation and pleasure. The result is a layered intertextual space in which divine motifs are not only parodied but reclaimed, enabling what could be read as both a critique of exclusionary theology and a re-enchantment of queer subjectivity.

In *Drag Race España* (Season 2), contestant Samantha Ballentines stages a performance dressed as a bleeding, stigmatised Virgin Mary, parodying Catholic iconography while offering a tender homage to her personal faith. Her portrayal oscillates between the blasphemous and the sacred, between satire and devotion. The audience laughs but also recognises the emotional gravity of the act. In this case, humour becomes a double-edged tool: it mocks religious authority while affirming the enduring spiritual needs of queer communities. This exemplifies a performative contradiction⁴³, in which parody and sincerity are not opposites but interdependent modes through which queerness negotiates the sacred. These performances underscore the complexity of queerness in relation to faith, revealing the impossibility of neat reconciliations. However, rather than resolving this tension, the performance dwells in it, staging a *carnavalesque inversion*⁴⁴ where the holy becomes profane, and

⁴³ Cf. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, 1990.

⁴⁴ Cf. M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. by H. Iswolsky, Bloomington, 1984.

the profane sacred, thereby enabling a queer reimagining of religious affect, iconography, and belonging.

Yet, for all their emotional potency, these televised narratives risk depoliticising the spiritual struggle by turning it into personal redemption. The burden of reconciliation is often placed squarely on the queer individual, who must forgive, transcend, or reinterpret their faith in ways that accommodate both their queerness and their spirituality. The structural critique of religious institutions, their role in marginalising, pathologising, or violently excluding LGBTIQ+ individuals, is frequently displaced by emotionally charged but ideologically neutral storytelling. The focus shifts from systemic accountability to personal healing, from collective resistance to individual coping.

The aesthetic and humorous strategies further deployed in these performances complicate the very notion of spiritual seriousness. By mixing sacred symbols with irreverent drag, *Drag Race* invites viewers to laugh while contemplating transcendence. This fusion produces what might be termed *camp redemption*, a performative mode in which salvation is not found through purity or repentance, but through sequins, wigs, and emotionally charged irony. Here, sacredness is reimagined not as solemn transcendence, but as theatrical excess, affective intensity, and unapologetic queerness.

Ultimately, the spiritual narratives featured on *Drag Race* reveal the ambivalence of queer reconciliation with religion; they are moments of courage and creativity, but also of ideological tension. Humour becomes the hinge upon which these tensions swing, disarming, displacing, and, at times, disguising the deeper conflict between queer existence and institutional theology. The divine, in this context, is not a fixed authority to be appeased, but a performative space to be inhabited, questioned, and reconfigured. And it is within this space that drag, as both a spectacle and a spiritual practice, continues to challenge the limits of the sacred and rewrite the grammar of redemption. Echoing Judith Butler's notion of performativity and Marcella Althaus-Reid's theology of the margins⁴⁵, these reimaginings of the sacred do not aim to assimilate into traditional religious frameworks, but rather to unsettle them, exposing their normative underpinnings and opening them to queer affect, desire, and multiplicity. In this context, drag becomes a liturgical practice of excess, a mode of queer witnessing where the body resists erasure and claims visibility within the symbolic economy of the sacred. Camp humour, with its

⁴⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble* cit.; Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* cit.

irony, theatricality, and emotional charge, operates as both desecration and devotion, offering new theological grammars that are at once subversive and sustaining. The laugh, the glitter, the performance, each becomes a sacramental gesture in a queer theology that affirms ambiguity over certainty, spectacle over doctrine, and survival over silence. By inhabiting and rewriting divine imagery, queer cultural productions create spiritual spaces of affiliation and resistance, where holiness may be found not in transcendence, but in the very materiality of queer life. Such reconfigurations of the sacred are also deeply rooted in practices of iconic reappropriation. Drag culture thrives on the power of the visual icon, hyperbolic, stylised, and affectively charged, to unsettle religious and cultural archetypes. The replication of saintly poses, the exaggerated gestures reminiscent of altarpiece figures, and the visual citationality embedded in drag aesthetics all contribute to what might be termed *strategic iconicity*: a conscious deployment of recognisable images to both invoke and disrupt dominant narratives. In *Drag Race*, this is evident in challenges such as 'Night of a Thousand Madonnas' (S8E5, S9E5), where contestants perform multiplicities of a single pop-cultural icon, thereby queering the very idea of singular sainthood. Here, iconicity is neither static nor reverent; it is fractured, multiplied, and camped up into a space of queer sacrality. Through these practices, queer cultural productions do not merely inhabit divine imagery; they queer its grammar, destabilising its singularity and opening it to plural, embodied, and affective affiliations. Iconicity thus becomes a tool of both spiritual parody and devotional reimagination, anchoring queer sacredness in performance, irony, and desire.

4. Conclusion

The reconfiguration of the divine in contemporary anglophone media reveals a radical shift in the spiritual imagination, one that relocates holiness from the heights of doctrinal transcendence to the glittering surfaces of queer embodiment. Far from desacralising the religious, the infusion of humour, camp, and parody into divine representations opens up a queer theological space in which performance becomes prayer, irony becomes invocation, and desire becomes liturgy. In this space, queer cultural productions do not merely critique institutional religion; they create alternative spiritual grammars that are affective, performative, and defiantly inclusive. At the heart of this

reimagination lies a strategic use of iconicity. As Balirano suggests⁴⁶, queer icons, be they drag queens, pop divas, or memeified saints, function as nodes of affective intensity and cultural memory, capable of generating new forms of collective belonging. These icons, often rooted in pain, marginalisation, or flamboyant excess, gain symbolic authority not despite their theatricality, but because of it. They operate as semiotic condensations of resistance, embodying what Halperin calls *the politics of the symbolic*, a terrain where camp aesthetics, sacred tropes, and queer desire intersect⁴⁷. The sacred, in this framework, is no longer a terrain of purity, but of contradiction, citation, and transformation.

However, as queer divinity becomes increasingly visible within mainstream media ecologies, it is also subject to the forces of commodification. The divine utterances of RuPaul, the votive aesthetics of drag culture, the parody-liturgies of shows like *Drag Race*, *Pose*, or *Our Flag Means Death*, all circulate within economies of branding, algorithmic amplification, and affective capital. This tension between radical disruption and neoliberal recuperation cannot be ignored. As queer spirituality becomes marketable, the risk emerges that the performative disobedience it once embodied might be aestheticised into consumable difference, rendered palatable for wider audiences at the cost of its critical edge.

Yet, to reduce queer theologies to commodified spectacle would be to overlook their performative insurgency. Echoing Marcella Althaus-Reid's liberationist theology of the margins and Judith Butler's performativity of gender, these mediated sacred performances persist in troubling hegemonic norms, precisely through their excessive, unstable, and impure nature. They affirm a spirituality rooted not in orthodoxy but in lived contradiction. The laugh, the glitter, the performance, each becomes a sacramental gesture, reclaiming joy in the face of erasure and constructing community through shared acts of citation, irony, and collective memory. At the same time, such performances remain vulnerable to institutional backlash and cultural appropriation. The same spectacle that empowers can also be neutralised through commodification or dismissed as frivolous excess. To fully grasp their radical potential, they must be read not only as aesthetic gestures but as political interventions that expose and unsettle systems of spiritual exclusion. In this sense, queering

⁴⁶ Balirano, *Of rainbow unicorns* cit.

⁴⁷ Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* cit.

God is not merely an act of rejection; it is an act of re-invention. It is a re-writing of sacred narratives through trauma, play, and spectacle; it is a refusal to let go of the divine, even as one dismantles its inherited representations. And it is a gesture of theological hospitality, one that welcomes ambiguity, multiplicity, and unruly bodies into spiritual discourse. Against the backdrop of exclusionary dogma, these cultural performances carve out spaces for a plural and embodied transcendence, where the divine is no longer a disembodied authority but a shimmering, contradictory presence, spoken, lip-synched, and performed into being.