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COMEDY AND TOLERANCE: VIR DAS, STANDUP COMEDY AND RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

*This essay examines the relationship between stand-up comedy and identity representation. The methods for examination begin with an overview of relevant humour theories, culminating in a case study of comedian Vir Das's role in cultivating a collective secular identity in India. The case study takes on the method of critical textual analysis. By contextualizing the content of Vir Das's 2018 Netflix stand-up special, *Losing It*, in relation to the historical and present landscape of religio-politics in India, I argue that stand-up routines like Vir Das's represent humour being used as a tool to promote secularism and religious tolerance. I then conclude by suggesting that the use of this type of humour in India should continue in order to foster an Indian collective identity that promotes secularism, religious freedom, and religious tolerance. Unexpectedly, I also conclude that Vir Das's religious-themed humour takes on a more tolerant, encompassing approach to mocking religious hegemony, compared to Western comedy approaches.*

Keywords: Comedy ▪ Stand-up ▪ Religion ▪ Hegemony ▪ India ▪ Politics ▪ Secularism ▪ Identity ▪ Community ▪ Social Movements

1. VIR DAS, RELIGIOUS COMEDY & RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN INDIA

According to the 42nd amendment of India's constitution adopted in 1976, India is a secular nation. However, the definition of secularism has been globally controversial. In India's case, the constitutional amendment failed to ever define secularism. The amendment implies that the nation accepts all religious beliefs, and that it declares no official religion. Simultaneously, though, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—often reflective of the Hindu Nationalist movement—remains the majority in parliament and subsequently holds major influence on the Hindu national-fundamentalist agenda (Bhargava, 2002).

The Indian secular movement has not necessarily come to a halt, though. Indeed, comedian Vir Das is one public figure in India who may be redefining, for some, what

it means to be Indian. Because of India's size and diversity, coupled with the rise of post-national identities, there will never be one Indian identity. Nonetheless, Das brings one of the many marginalized identities within India – the secular Indian – to the sphere. Although he is a proud adherent of the Hindu faith, his comedy advocates for a legitimately secular Indian state and secular global order.

As such, Das represents the Indian secular community – Indians who are not afraid to break from tradition, criticize, and hope for a better relationship between government and religion. The land of India has a long and diverse relationship with many religions, but comedy has been a rare platform in the country for religious and social criticism. The success of Indian comedians such as Vir Das could result in greater public acceptance of the Indian secular identity, nationally and globally. Understanding that secularism in India is in jeopardy, comedy in India should be encouraged as a tool to further promote secularism and religious tolerance.

Das has an 8½ - minute religious-themed segment in his 2018 Netflix original stand-up special called *Losing It*. A critical textual analysis of this segment is worthwhile in speculating how Das might resonate with those who have been oppressed – or those who sympathize with the oppressed – throughout India's recent religio-political history. Before the analysis of Vir Das's stand-up content, it is important to firstly understand the science behind comedy's ability to cultivate a collective identity while informing and activating citizens. I would also like to address previous critical analyses on anti-religious and atheist-agnostic humour.

1.1. The Potential of Humour in Society

Since the start of this millennium, humour scholars tend to agree that humour and rationality are not mutually exclusive (Bingham & Hernandez, 2001). Because of the inherent format of stand-up, in which comedians are given a “space of free inquiry where no subject is taboo and the rules of political correctness can be temporarily suspended,” comedians have been able to successfully instigate dialogue on social issues in a way that sociologists have failed to do. This is because of the inherently dry, technical approach attached to any academic discipline (Bingham et al., 2001, p. 339). It seems then that comedians use their platform not simply to entertain, but to challenge the status quo and articulate thoughts that many avoid sharing because of social constraint. And perhaps comedy's power can be summed up even more simply by humourist author Julia Fox's claim that, “when people are in a positive mood, they're taking in more information” (cited in Hurwitz, 2006). These findings provide substantial evidence to support any intuitions that comedy may have positive effects and can often support the dry, technical format of standard education.

While we can celebrate comedy's educational benefits, we should also be wary of its occasional role in encouraging negative stereotypes, cloaking intolerance, and fuelling hatred or violent opposition. Duke University behavioural scientist Mahadev Apte famously highlighted this as “an American sociocultural dilemma,”

particularly in reference to the controversial use of ethnic humour in American pop culture (Apte, 1987, p. 27). The use of humour as insult and degradation undoubtedly stretches far beyond American borders.

Regardless, the study of humour's effects has received plenty of attention since the rise of American political satire programs in the first decade of the 2000s. Previous late-night American television personalities such as David Letterman or Jay Leno sought to make the discussion of politics an apolitical pastime, targeting political figures with *ad hominem* attacks on their quirky appearances or behaviours (Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018). The 2000s, however, saw a rise of passionate and opinionated political satirists such as John Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Indeed, these two TV personalities have become a notorious one-two punch in the U.S., using a humorous approach to provide left-leaning talking points while dismantling right-leaning ones. Humour and culture scholars have since studied political satire reception in order to argue that its consumption can shape or reinforce political attitudes. More importantly, though, such satire consumption also correlates directly with various forms of political participation (Baumgartner et al., 2018). With these insights in mind, we can see a clear benefit to the proliferation of religious humour within India. As Indian humourists spread their message, they may also prompt public discussion, and hopefully, public tolerance. The discussion of politics and religion may be separate, yet there is no denying of existing overlap – especially in India, where the ethnic and religious diversity of the nation dominates and sways public policy discussion.

Similar to effects noted by Baumgartner and Lockerbie (2018), others have noted that the exposure to social satire programs can help trigger a wide range of sensations and subsequent behaviours, beginning with anxiety and ending in political activation (Cao & Brewer, 2008; Doona, 2016; Jovanovic, 2019). Particularly, in Serbia, social and political satire consumption has been shown to elicit negative feelings towards the current socio-political climate, leading to a desire amongst viewers to contribute to positive social change (Jovanovic, 2019). In the same Serbian case, exposure to the popular *24 Minuta* and *Njuz.net* satirical programs provided many viewers with a sense of social cohesion and a collective identity, offering an imagined space for individuals to feel less alone with their political anxieties (Cao et al., 2008; Jovanovic, 2019). In other words, humorous, satirical media may offer audiences an approachable, safe space to scrutinize ineffective government (Doona, 2016). Indeed, political comedy audiences often find that their political frustration and perceived sense of social injustice leads to the strengthening of their shared political identities, especially those within otherwise marginalized communities (Jovanovic, 2019). Because of these beneficial effects, the use of satire in society is “vital in challenging democratic deficit and fostering active citizenship” (Jovanovic, 2019, p. 33). These academic insights are especially poignant for contextualizing the benefits of stand-up comedian Vir Das's use of social satire in the less-than-democratic nation of India.

We should further consider humour's abilities to critique religious hegemony while resonating with—and activating—audiences. Katja Guenther, Natasha

Radojic and Kerry Mulligan (2015) are three humour scholars who mutually argue that comedy can often be a central aspect of collective identity cultivation against an opposition. They demonstrate this through a case study on *New Atheism*. According to biologist-turned-philosopher Richard Dawkins, one of the movement's founding members, New Atheists seek to "raise [the] consciousness" of the public by highlighting that humans do not need to answer to a deity or higher power in order to live a balanced, intellectually and morally fulfilling life (Dawkins, 2006, p. 1). This 21st century movement, though, seems rooted more so in promoting the criticism of superstitious, hegemonic religion than in the acceptance of secular, humanist rationalism. For example, Dawkins uses most of his writing space to criticize theories of intelligent design (i.e., the "God Hypothesis"), as well as instances of religious hegemony (Dawkins, 2006, p. 2). Dawkins and other New Atheist thinkers make note of the seemingly dictated nature of the "indoctrination" of mentally developing children (Dawkins, 2006, p. 5). New Atheists see this indoctrination not only within the household, but also from within the school system and the state. With these critical New Atheist principles in mind, Guenther et al. (2015) use their analysis of the secular movement to suggest that "humour is central in depicting opponents in a negative light" (2015, p. 217). They highlight how atheist humour frames devout religious believers as humourless, ridiculous, undemocratic, and distant from the mainstream culture. Analysis of the New Atheist movement adds to the growing literature exposing the acceptance and proliferation of anti-religious rhetoric, as well as how enjoying anti-religious rhetoric cultivates a collective identity. Limitations remain though, as the New Atheist movement and its accompanying atheist humour are largely Western phenomena that have not yet become universal. There is no popular representation of these phenomena in India.

Continuing with the focus on the criticism of religion in Western society – particularly Christianity – I want to assess the work of scholar Rick Moore (2011), who dissects Bill Maher's documentary comedy, *Religulous*. The documentary pleads for religious agnosticism by challenging dominant, faith-based ideology. Moore performs a content analysis of *Religulous*'s critic reviews from the top 20 newspapers in the U.S. (top simply referring to highest circulation, not highest rated). He tackles this analysis from the lens of cultural hegemony. Interestingly, he believes that critic reviews act as a "second line of defence" for reinforcing hegemonic ideology and that that attempts to change hegemonic ideology would be more successful if media [and its critics] were not always so keen on defending the status quo (Moore, 2011, p. 112). Maher's *Religulous* is a production that largely focuses on the criticism of Christianity; however, he does discuss the absurdities of other religions, too. Similarly, we will see that comedian Vir Das challenges the status quo of all organized religion, not just Hinduism.

In order to contextualize the modern use of humour as a tool for social criticism, we must look at its historical success, as well. Indeed, this historical approach is a necessary step for the analysis of any modern human phenomenon (Harari, 2017). One of the earliest and most successful productions of religious criticism came

from Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume. In his work *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Hume uses humour and satire to address some of the contradictions and absurdities of religion. Scholar Richard White (1989) dissects the methods in which Hume criticizes religion, in order to argue that, just as Bill Maher did in *Religulous*, Hume takes down the religious hypothesis through ridicule and irony rather than calculated, logical arguments. White (1989) points out how David Hume publicized and fostered the criticism of religion during the European Enlightenment. White (1989) also suggests religious belief is a “feeling” that cannot be countered through serious objections. Lastly, the author suggests criticism of religion, to be successful, must be subtle or “rhetorically inspired” through parody and satire (White, 1989, p. 393). With these insights in mind, I have a better understanding of how comedy today continues to foster Christian scepticism and how it can be used in the future to foster appropriate levels of scepticism towards religion, in general.

To highlight relevant analyses on the criticism of religion in media antiquity, Tanny provides a brief history of Jewish humour, starting with the medieval *Toledot Yeshu*, a “cluster of folktales” (Tanny, 2015, p. 170). Tanny (2015) draws a variety of parallels that connect medieval Jewish humour to the present perspective of Jewish humour. The focus on history in relation to modern landscape is a notable example for my forthcoming research. Tanny (2015) notes that Jewish humour originally took place in the private sphere, where it was safe from Christian hegemonic oppression. Indeed, the *Toledot Yeshu* is seen to be a notable example of how Christianity is parodied in Jewish and Western society. Jokes are typically based on the absurdities of supernatural claims like Jesus’s divinity and Mary’s virginity. With this history of Jewish humour in mind, it makes sense to suggest that, perhaps, religious comedy in India may still be stuck in the private sphere, with comedians such as Vir Das slowly beginning to break the tradition.

To end our brief outline of humour theories and effects, I review an analysis of *The Simpsons*, a popular example of religious humour in American society. David Feltmate is a humour scholar who, through his *Simpsons* analysis, highlights the notion of critical intertextuality – the idea that “through parody, transgressive texts can work to disarm and dismantle the hegemonic status quo.... provoking a new, counter-hegemonic understanding” (Graym 2006, p. 46 as cited in Feltmate, 2013). He analyses every episode of “The Simpsons (from 1989-2012) and finds that 95% of episodes make at least one reference to religion and 5.5% of episodes use religion as a central theme in their plot (Feltmate, 2013, p. 225). Undoubtedly, then, an analysis of the television series was worthwhile if we consider that “external satires of a religious tradition are important examples for understanding how that religion is treated in the wider cultural context” (Feltmate, 2013, p. 231). Similar to Moore’s (2011) findings on Bill Maher’s *Religulous*, Feltmate finds that the hegemony of religion can clearly be challenged through humour in a way that cultivates collective identity against religious persecutors.

In summary, below are the key findings from this literature review of comedy & religion that will be relied upon (later in the paper) in order to connect Das's comedy with the potential benefits of its receptions:

- Humour can be used to inform (Bingham et al., 2001; Cao et al., 2008; Doona, 2016; Jovanovic, 2019).
- Satire can shape or reinforce socio-political attitudes, as well as politically activate audiences (Baumgartner et al., 2018).
- Logical arguments are often too dry and technical, and comedy is an approachable platform for increasing the receptive strength of an argument (White, 1989).
- Parody texts challenge hegemonic ideology in a subtle way (White, 1989; Tanny, 2015; Feltmate, 2013).
- Parodical, anti-opposition rhetoric in comedy helps cultivate a collective identity, providing a safe, communal space for the proliferation of shared motivations and goals, as well as shared disgust in oppositional forces (Doona, 2016; Guenther et al., 2015; Kumar & Combe, 2015).
- Socio-political satire triggers anxiety, often leading to increased political participation due to a desire for positive social change (Cao et al., 2008; Jovanovic, 2019).

2. RELIGIO-POLITICS IN INDIA: HISTORICAL CONTEXT & PRESENT LANDSCAPE

2.1. India as a 'secular' nation

It is often thought that India is the birthplace of Hinduism, as well as Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism. In part because of their historical diversity, Indian parliament decided to officially declare India a secular nation. It was officially adopted in their constitution, in November of 1949, and furthermore acknowledged in 1972 in the 42nd amendment to the constitution, which declared India as a secular nation in the preamble. The formal declaration of secularism in India has been controversial since its inception. In theory, though, what does it mean to be a secular nation? Indian political theorist Rajeev Bhargava (2002) considers these seven features of secularism in his piece *What is Indian Secularism and What is it for?*

1. Disestablishment of religion. (Articles 27 & 28)
2. Religious liberty to any one religious group. (Articles 25-28)
3. Religious liberty granted non-preferentially to members of every religious group. (Articles 25-28)
4. The liberty to embrace a religion other than the one into which a person is born and to reject all religions. (Articles 25-28)
5. No discrimination by the state on grounds of religion to entitlements provided by the state. (Article 15)

6. No discrimination in admission to educational institutions on grounds of religion. (Article 29)
7. Equality of active citizenship: no discrimination on grounds of religion. (Articles 16 and 325)

Although Articles 15, 16, 25(1), 26, 27, 28, 29, and Article 325 of the constitution confirm India as a secular land, some Indian political theorists consider Articles 17 and 30, and section (2) (B) of Article 25, as a departure from secularism, at least in the Western tradition (Bhargava, 2002). India cannot be a secular nation in the Western sense because of the discrepancies between the social practices of each religious group. Religious individuals in India and throughout South Asia focus more on involving themselves in social practices and traditions, contrasting the Western religions, which put more focus on the beliefs held by individuals (Bhargava, 2002). The emphasis on practice makes it difficult to strike down equally just laws, because it may be perceived as discriminatory towards one religious group's practices while favouring another's. For this reason, Indian government does not fully separate church and state, rather they act from a "principled distance;" they attempt to operationalize this distance by creating community-based rights in which there are different laws for each religious community, and, where "the state has intervened in the affairs of some religious communities more than in others" (Bhargava, 2002, p. 5). For example, Hindu reform movements have led to the abolition of the caste system and child marriage, as well as introduced the right to divorce and the right to inter-caste marriages. However, these laws are not applicable to Muslim-Indian communities, who are governed by the Muslim Personal Law/Sharia Law and have separate cultural concerns. Secular reform created a variety of measures to protect community-based rights, and these measures promote "1) positive discrimination, 2) special government programs to raise the level of welfare of religious minorities," and, "3) the establishment and functioning of the state's special institutions for protecting minority rights" (Fayzullina & Mukkhametzhanova-Duggal, 2014, p. 14). Principled distance discussions also often include debates over the necessity of separate electorates in the assembly (Bhargava, 2002). It is believed community-based social rights and other principled distance policies in India are necessary if the nation wants to claim secularity, because, "it is extremely difficult for non-Muslims to realize the Current needs and requirements of the Muslim community" (Bhargava, 2002, p. 21).

3. CASE STUDY: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SEGMENT FROM LOSING IT (14:55-23:30)

3.1. Methodology

A textual analysis of Comedian Vir Das's religious-based comedy segments should be particularly helpful in understanding the concepts of his content in relation to India's theoretical secularism and the impeding Hindu nationalist movement. My

form of analysis takes from a popular methodology utilized in media studies, known as discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is helpful for identifying “themes, consistencies, and patterns across and between texts and to connect these to wider contexts and social formations” (Gill, 2017, p. 28). This case study focuses specifically on the themes within Vir Das’s stand-up special. These themes include, but are not limited to, religious identity, secular freedom, global peace, and community. As the prominent critical discourse analyst Teun van Dijk notes, “the crucial presupposition of adequate critical discourse analysis is understanding the nature of social power and dominance” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 254). I focus, specifically, on the nature of power and dominance in the intersecting social, political, and religious landscapes of India. The analysis further highlights the use of humorous approaches to address such themes. The analysis is also interpretive and ideological in nature. It is interpretive, in that it relies solely on my expanding, yet limited, level of awareness of the “social, political, and cultural trends and contexts,” pulled from both within and outside of the case text (Gill, 2017, p. 26). It is ideological, in that it “examines a cultural artefact as a means of understanding and illuminating the ideological notions that run through it” (Gill, 2017, p. 27). The analysis connects the selected content to a wider network of resistance and progressive ideology, by examining how humorous rhetoric affectively challenges religious power and dominance.

To reiterate my argument: With the understanding that comedy can be used as a tool to inform (Bingham et al., 2001; Cao et al., 2008; Doona, 2016; Jovanovic, 2019), to shape socio-political attitudes (Baumgartner et al., 2018), to challenge hegemonic ideology (Feltmate, 2013; White, 1989; Tanny, 2015), to cultivate a collective identity (Doona, 2016; Guenther et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2015), and, above all, to politically activate citizens (Cao et al., 2008; Guenther et al., 2015; Jovanovic, 2019), paired with the knowledge that secularism in India remains in jeopardy (Vaishnav, 2019), comedy in India can and should be encouraged as a tool to promote secularism and religious tolerance, and to curb the aggressions of religious hegemony. In the following analysis, I relate passages from Das’s stand-up special to the present landscape of religio-politics in India. Das is a comedian born in Bombay, India. He was raised in Nigeria, studied performance art in the United States and Moscow, and has since returned to India to star in Hindi cinema.

In Vir Das’s 2018 Netflix Special, *Losing It*, Das embraces the unity of world religions and ridicules the polarization of them. Coming from a country with such widespread diversity, he’s not afraid to question sacred Hindu doctrine or put it aside for the sake of unity. He’s able to reach an audience that similarly enjoys criticism in the form of humour. Although much of his stand-up special light-heartedly pokes fun at the peculiarities of wholesome topics like childhood and travelling, Das dedicates 8 ½ minutes to the criticism of religion to the criticism of religion and religious hegemony. Below, I analyse four segments of Das’s stand-up comedy special, particularly the bits of his special that focus on religion. His comedy segments are analysed

in order, as follows: Election strategy, Selfies and the portrayal of deities, Scripture as really old superhero stories, and Uniting all religions.

3.2. Election Strategy

Growing up, Das struggled with writing in cursive English. He was unable to connect his letters, so his mother advised him to write in block letters. Unfortunately, the use of block letters added a commanding emphasis to his words that suggested he was screaming his thoughts out. This led to poor exam scores, as Das proclaims:

I got 52% in English, even though my answers were good. And I think it's because the examiner thought I was yelling at him. You know, he's just reading my paper. "THE REINCARNATIONS OF KRISHNA REPRESENT THE TRUE LINE OF INDIAN MYTHOLOGY!" He's like, "Well, that's a good point, but I don't like your attitude." Because back then, a Hindu screaming angrily for no reason seemed strange. Now it's election strategy.

What seemed like a blithe story about a misunderstanding between teacher and pupil sharply turned into a brief criticism of the Hindu nationalist movement. Das's crafty joke structure offered the audience a chance to first laugh with him at his past before presenting the punchline which mocks Hindu election strategy. At the time of this paper's submission, India's month-long 2019 general election period is underway and there's no shortage of pundits screaming at each other on live broadcast television or at other public venues. The Bharatiya Janata Party's majority rule began as Narendra Modi and the BJP catapulted to the forefront of Indian politics in 2014 after roughly 10 years of majority rule by the Congress Party— 10 years in which the BJP claimed that the Congress Party merely promoted pseudo-secularism for "selfish political interest" and "short-term electoral gain" (Vaishnav, 2019, pp. 9, 13). Their success in the election might have reflected their campaign promises – reinvigorating the economy and stamping down on corruption— more so than a public dissatisfaction with secularism, however, the BJP continues using aggressive language to promote the broader Hindutva movement and incite public discrimination towards The Congress Party and widespread non-Hindu practices. Das, despite practicing Hinduism, is not afraid to criticize the Hindu nationalist election strategies and implicitly make note of the nationalist movement's polarization of the Hindu and the "other."

3.3. Selfies and the portrayal of deities

His first religious-based joke touches on his relationship with God. Das finds it is frustrating that religions around the world constantly misrepresent the image and likeness of their gods. He believes God exists in children, nature, and animals rather

than in churches, temples, and mosques, and he believes the religious elite have enforced false images of God to a point that followers are so confident in the image that they do not even question its authenticity.

You ever take a selfie? And you know how to make yourself look good in that selfie, right? But if you hand your friend the phone, they will fuck up the selfie. Absolutely. Why? Because they do not understand your correct angles. I think for God, man is that friend. We have always fucked up the image of God because we don't understand his correct angles.

Das goes on to ponder how these gods might feel if they walked into a holy place and saw their representation. Stepping into the character of Jesus Christ, Das proclaims:

Who drew that shit? You, Leonardo? Come here.... What is this shit? What is that? I carried that cross for three days without carbs. You couldn't draw a tricep, you son of a bitch?

And, Das on the Hindu god Ganesha:

What the fuck is that? I'm half man, half elephant. That's brown and gray. What is all this colour? What are you people on acid? What is this? Hinduism by Disney?

Das's rhetoric points out the hegemony around the portrayal of gods. Throughout time, personifications of our gods become cemented in our outlook. It is understandable to want a visual depiction of someone or something that you worship. However, problems may occur when the depiction (or lack of depiction) becomes hegemonic, in the sense that those who disagree with it will be socially, or even federally, ostracized. The case of federal ostracization is most notably seen through the discouragement of any visual depiction of the Muslim prophet Muhammad:

Muslims, I think the first time Muhammad walked into a mosque, he was like... [awkward pause]... I don't know what Muhammad looks like, do you? Nobody does. Every time we draw the guy, somebody gets shot. Remember? I'm not doing that joke.

This light-hearted approach that Das takes towards mocking multiple major religions creates an atmosphere of tolerance. Ridiculing one religion might be considered discriminatory, however, opening the floor for comedically criticizing multiple religions - in this case, regarding the depiction of gods - sets a collective tone in the audience that it is acceptable to laugh at both your religion and the religion of others, without fear of persecution.

In 2019, India's population exceeded 1.35 billion people. 80% of Indians identify as Hindu, 13% as Muslims, 2.3% as Christian, 1.9% as Sikhs, 0.9% as nonreligious, 0.8% as Buddhists, and 0.4% as Jains (World Population Review, 2019). Merely 0.1% of Indians accounts for over 1.35 million people. But wait, we can keep going. Even .001%, then, is arguably a large enough subpopulation for the collective cultivation of a particular identity (135,000). These demographic statistics highlight the ethno-religious diversity in the country, at a time in India where it is now politically advantageous to boast Hinduism. However, the country is simply too diverse to effectively rely on the religio-political beliefs of a Hindu nationalist administration (BJP). Das's insistence on subjecting Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam to ridicule reminds us that depictions of gods are often arbitrary, and sometimes obscured or exploited for purposes of maintaining hegemony while thwarting individual expression.

3.4. Uniting all religions

Das continues his criticism of religious hegemony by suggesting that religious dogmatism should take a step back.

I believe the future of world peace is not going to come from politics or economics. It will come from religions. The world will be okay when every religion in the world learns to have some fun and chill the fuck out. Can we agree on that, yeah? [applause]...

He expresses his dissatisfaction with the present landscape of Christian-Muslim relations, suggesting the two religions combine to form 'Chrislam,' where people worship in chosques (church + mosque), celebrate Eid-ster (Eid Al-Fitr + Easter), and pray for pitta bread. "Give us this day our pitta bread. As we forgive those who hummus against us." Das uses his platform and popularity to destigmatize the differences between religions and to promote tolerance. Although suggestions like these are comically impractical, the underlying assumption Das wants us to understand is that our planet will not find peace unless religious communities learn how to tolerate other religious communities. He hopes for a world free of intolerance, but he only holds this hope because he understands that secularism in India remains at risk, as the *Hindutva* movement continues to connect individuals who seek to bring back India's Hindu identity. The central goal of this movement is to reclaim India's sacred geography under the guise that terrestrial India is the birthplace and holy land of Hindus (Bhargava, 2002).

Subsequently, Leaders within the movement tend to frame Muslims and Christians as culturally dangerous "others," and they refuse to accept secularism as anything more than "a fraudulent foreign Taxation, perpetrated by elites associated with the Congress Party" (Vaishnav, 2019, p. 3). The left-leaning Congress Party, too, has begun embracing Hindu identity, perhaps because of the BJP's Electoral success

since 2014. It is believed it's in attempt to curb the BJP's religious appeal, suggesting that its now politically advantageous to promote pro-Hindu social behaviour (Vaishnav, 2019). Therefore, regardless of the winner of the 2019 elections, secularism will remain at risk in India. With this contextual understanding, it seems worthwhile to consider more seriously comedy's partner-political pull. While it may have no explicit political value, more comedy in India like Vir Das's, in which we're reminded of absurdities of religious hegemony, could result in a greater tolerance and greater acceptance of secularism.

3.5. Scripture as really old superhero stories

Focusing most of his religious-based comedy on uniting Christians and Muslims, Das is not afraid to circle back to Hindu doctrine. Hindu nationalists continue to find reasons to either displace, discriminate, or disregard Indian-Muslims and Indian-Christians who have a claim to India as their place of birth. Nationalists imply that because India is the Hindu homeland, ethno-religious minorities should be treated as second-class citizens and that development efforts should put Hindus at the forefront. Despite largely refraining from federal intervention in religious affairs, the BJP has opened the gates to allow for a wide range of changes at the state and sub-state level. For religious minorities in India, this may be instigating fear of a return to anachronistic laws. See how Das questions religions' anachronistic qualities, with a focus on Hindu doctrine:

What is religion? It's a really old comic book. It's a really old superhero story. Muslims, Allah is your Batman. Christians, Jesus is your Superman.... But Hindus, we created the Avengers... There're too many guys. Nobody knows what the story is. And don't eat beef. No matter what we say, we don't understand any of it. We just end it with "don't eat beef." "Don't eat beef" is our "Despacito."

Das seems to struggle with the necessity of the non-beef doctrine, perhaps for good reason. The issue, revolving around the cow as sacred to Hindu ideology, has recently led to violent controversies. The Indian states of Haryana and Maharashtra have seen a stamping down on laws prohibiting cow slaughter as well as the sale and possession of beef. This movement to strengthen Hindu law has encouraged a call for vigilante justice, leading to lynching and mob violence (Vaishnav, 2019). Additionally, among other policy changes attempting to reverse Indian secularism, the BJP also selected Yogi Adityanath as chief minister in Uttar Pradesh, a populous, influential district often considered the "metaphorical heart of the Hindu heartland" (Vaishnav, 2019, p. 10). Adityanath operates at a conspiracy-like level, claiming Muslim men target Hindu women for conversion. Adityanath countered this "phenomenon" by creating a program to convert minorities back to Hinduism. Lastly, the BJP umbrella has

allowed for states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan to rewrite their histories and “downplay Islamic contributions to Indian history and culture” (Vaishnav, 2019, p. 10). Considering these examples of increased enforcement of fundamental Hindu law and the accompanying incitement of violence, as well as a push to convert Muslims to Hinduism, complemented by a downplay of their historical contributions to society, Das’s bravery should be acknowledged. Indeed, his speech may come with ostracism from various social groups within his own country, providing us one reason for why he may have chosen to film his special in San Francisco, United States. In the U.S., Das has access to a large Indian American and Indian diasporic community. Perhaps he feels comfortable criticizing from afar while still reaching an invested audience, relinquishing any fears of a direct backlash from native audiences and politicians.

4. CONCLUSION & LIMITATIONS

Never does Vir Das take sides on one religion’s viewpoint, and never does he ridicule one’s beliefs. This contrasts with Western comedians, such as Bill Maher and Ricky Gervais, who openly promote atheism and openly reject all organized religions. This direct approach to rejecting organized religion may work for the West’s New Atheist movement, but because religious practice is so enriched in South Asian daily life, a light-hearted, all-encompassing approach to mocking religious hegemony may work better. As I conclude this research, it is my opinion that secular Indian comedians should look at religions with a critical eye; however, they should also avoid overtly anti-religious rhetoric. I believe the light-hearted approach that Das takes towards mocking multiple major religions creates an atmosphere of tolerance. Ridiculing one religion might be considered discriminatory, however, opening the floor for comedically criticizing multiple religions sets a collective tone in the audience that it’s okay to laugh at both your religion and the religion of others, without fear of persecution.

Das’s insistence on subjecting Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam to ridicule reminds us that while each person’s religious beliefs hold validity in their hearts and in their communities, they nonetheless often take on hegemonic qualities, become subjected to political exploitation, and/or thwart individual expression. Again, to reiterate my argument, Das’s 2018 Netflix Special, *Losing It*, represents comedy being used as a tool to promote secularism and religious tolerance, while criticizing the intolerance found throughout the world, and more notably, throughout India. The use of humour in India should continue in order to help foster an Indian collective identity that promotes secularism, religious freedom, and religious tolerance.

While an in-depth analysis of one of the leading Indian comedians may be worthwhile to understand comedy’s ability to promote tolerance, there are still a variety of limitations to this study. For one, there is much more on the history and diversity of India, the controversies over Indian secularism, and the present landscape of Indian politics that were simply not feasible to cover within the timeframe of this project.

There's also an understanding that some comedy can promote persecution rather than tolerance, where the religious ridicule turns hostile rather than light-hearted. Furthermore, within the same line of concerned reasoning, it is entirely possible that Das's comedy provides fuel for opponents of his secular perspective, in such a way that is more powerful than any of the positive effects for the secular community. With any push for social change, we have to consider the backlash that accompanies it. Here, backlash is usually a resistance from those who feel their identities and capacities are threatened (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008). It'd be worthwhile to analyse audience reactions to Das and other religious-themed comedians throughout India, to find if some use comedy to promote (rather than criticize) Hindu nationalism or other forms of religious hegemony. Yes, his performances receive laughter and critical acclaim, but has anything or will anything change in India, in part of success. Longitudinal quantitative studies on representative samples of the Indian population might work well to prove this.

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