

Spiritual humour as resistance and renewal: Desmond Tutu and apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

In contexts of systemic injustice and dehumanisation, humour can function as a significant form of spiritual practice through which individuals and communities resist oppression and foster renewal. Laughter in such contexts transforms relationships, strengthens resilience, and opens imaginative space for reconfiguring oppressive realities. Drawing on perspectives from Christian spirituality and humour studies, this article situates humour within its socio-political and religious contexts and argues that it functions as a spiritual praxis. It develops a typology of humour, with particular attention to its self-deprecating and mystical dimensions, showing how these forms of laughter cultivate interior freedom while sustaining communal solidarity and engaging questions of ultimate meaning. Apartheid South Africa is engaged as a paradigmatic example, with particular attention to the witness of Desmond Tutu, to illustrate how spiritual humour operates within conditions of extreme oppression. In this way, humour not only confronts injustice but also participates in the transformation of oppressive realities and the renewal of persons and communities. The article thus retrieves laughter as a vital yet underexplored resource for spiritual resistance, recreation, and communal flourishing.

Keywords

Spiritual humour; humour as resistance; humour as renewal; Desmond Tutu; humour typology; self-deprecation

1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed the consolidation of humour studies as a significant interdisciplinary field, encompassing such disciplines as

sociology, philosophy, political theory and theology. This development has contributed to a growing recognition of humour as a socially and politically consequential practice, rather than a merely affective or trivial phenomenon. In contexts marked by conflict and structural injustice, furthermore, humour has been increasingly analysed as a medium through which social realities are interpreted, contested and transformed.¹

Within this framework, humour functions as an entry point into social perception and collective imagination. Whereas earlier intellectual traditions often dismissed humour as emotionally irrational or intellectually frivolous, contemporary scholarship has begun to reassess its analytical and critical significance. Humour is now increasingly recognised as a medium of ethical critique, political expression, and social empowerment.²

Within this emerging field, the study of humour in apartheid South Africa also provides a particularly compelling case of its transformative potential. This is evident in religious discourse in the South African context, where humour has served as a significant resource for resisting political oppression. This article therefore analyses the role of humour in this setting, arguing that it manifests a spiritual dimension that not only critiques abusive structures but also gestures toward alternative visions beyond political domination.

Humour in this spiritual sense is understood in this article as a mode of response to the perceived involvement of the divine in human life, unfolding as an ongoing practice shaped within specific social and religious contexts and oriented toward the transformation of both individuals and communities. It carries an ethical dimension, yet – because it is grounded in belief – it is not reducible to moral instruction or moralism. Rather, it

1 For an example of how extensive humour affects social discourse, cf. Mohamed Adhikari, “‘God Made the White Man, God Made the Black Man ...’: Popular Racial Stereotyping of Coloured People in Apartheid South Africa,” *South African Historical Journal* 55 (2006): 142–64.

2 Cf. the remarks in Paul Martin, Nicole Graham, and Christian Hempelmann, “Introduction to the Special Issue: Humour and Religion, ‘You Must Be Joking?!’,” *Humor* 37 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2024-001>; Anita Houck, “Holiness and Humour,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2007): 47, which provides helpful information on the history of research in humour studies.

seeks a holistic integration of life oriented by values such as justice, equality, human dignity and mercy.

This spiritual humour is exemplified in the lives and writings of two leading leaders in the political struggle against the apartheid state. One of the prominent persons in this regard was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. There were, however, several other religious leaders who were active in the struggle against the state, including Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane, Denis Hurley, Albert Nolan,³ Albert Geyser, Nico Smith, Andre Hugo, Beyers Naude – to name a few examples.⁴ All of them were persons of influence, being church leaders or academics of note. Their involvement as religious practitioners of influence represents a spiritual engagement with suffering to challenge the devastation caused by the political system.

Within this group, it was especially Tutu who, ironically, used humour as a spiritual approach to oppose injustice and to rebuild a new society. This became evident when he later on promoted the quest to uncover the criminalities of the apartheid era as chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He referred explicitly to the role of and need for laughter, even amidst the heavy times of oppression and trauma of the apartheid hearings. His perspective reflects Houck's "ambiguous holiness" of humour. – a capacity to hold grief and joy, despair and hope, within a single human gesture. In addition, his approach was rooted in ubuntu as a key African motif which affirms the shared humanity of all people and the sacredness of relational life. It is a laughter that resists, heals and restores. This emphasis on the importance of humour reflected an ongoing attitude and insight that underlined its continuous use as a spiritual practice.⁵

3 Allan Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), is an example of engagement with spirituality by someone deeply involved in the struggle for justice. For another notable example, cf. Leonardo Boff, *Way of the Cross – Way of Justice*, trans. John Drury (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021).

4 Cf. Smit, D. (2004). *Beyers Naudé and the Witness of the Church*. (Journal of Theology for Southern Africa).

5 Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997); and *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography of South Africa's Confessor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021). Battle interprets Tutu's work through the trilogy of purgation, illumination, and contemplation. This article investigates humour in terms of Battle's contemplative stage. Cf. also Charles G. Haws, "Suffering, Hope and Forgiveness: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62, no. 4 (2009): 477–89. For a critical response to the

Tutu's deployment of humour is frequently interpreted through the lens of ubuntu.¹ Yet this association remains contested. While some theological readings emphasise forgiveness and reconciliation as intrinsic to ubuntu, other philosophical accounts stress relational accountability, restitution and the restoration of moral order. In their view, humour should not be understood as a straightforward expression of forgiveness. Rather, it operates within a productive tension: it gestures towards reconciliation without negating the demands of justice and affirms shared humanity without obscuring the persistence of harm.

2. The contextual nature of humour in apartheid society

Humour varies according to its situation. In the context of apartheid South Africa, political humour reacted to systemic oppression, repressive laws, and pervasive state control. This resistance manifested in diverse ways, from township wit to theatrical satire and pulpit humour. Laughter could, however, be both humiliating, entrenching racial prejudices, or restorative, instilling courage and action.⁶

Building on humour's positive role as a spiritual resource, the following parts trace its use in community life, in prophetic leadership, and in the deeper theological understanding of laughter's spiritual nature.

2.1 Humour in community life

By blending levity with insight, leaders like Tutu enabled communities to confront oppression. Laughter, irony, and relational wit reinforced courage, fostered solidarity, and affirmed shared humanity, sustaining resilience under extreme conditions. Ritual dances and satirical songs

role and phenomenon of ubuntu, see Keolebogile Mbebe, "Ubuntu Does Not Require Forgiveness: A Critique of the TRC's Pressure on Apartheid Victims to Forgive Their Perpetrators," *Phronimon* 26 (2025). Drawing on Mogobe Ramose, Mbebe argues that ubuntu is grounded in relational accountability and restitution rather than forgiveness as such.

6 Its negative side was evident in the cruelty of, for example, the "necklacing" of suspected collaborators—victims executed with a petrol-soaked tyre. The ANC, as the political branch of the struggle, publicly denounced these killings and those who legitimised them. Cf. Riedwaan Moosage, "A Prose of Ambivalence: Liberation Struggle Discourse on Necklacing," *Kronos: Southern African Histories* 36, no. 1 (2010), which describes the political risks of not condemning the practice.

mocked apartheid officials and pass laws, turning fear into laughter and despair into defiant joy. Such communal humour bound people together, transforming humiliation into solidarity. While these expressions of levity arose organically, they also served a deeper purpose: reinforcing moral and spiritual resilience in the face of systemic oppression. By collectively reframing fear and injustice, communities cultivated both a sense of agency and a shared, lived experience of defiance.

At the same time, humour was weaponised through demeaning racist names, caricatures, and the mocking of African languages and accents, reinforcing stereotypes of Black intellectual inferiority. Neville Alexander describes this as the “corrosive culture of contempt for all things African,” a daily practice reproduced in interactions between the dominant and the dominated.⁷ Similar patterns occurred within African communities, where groups sometimes mocked the customs, speech, or appearance of others. In these contexts, laughter functioned as a deliberate act of dehumanisation, ritualistically fortifying the powerful while upholding the violent hierarchies of the state.

This period also cautions against romanticising the church’s role. Many congregations hesitated to condemn violent acts, fearing accusations of supporting the apartheid regime. Such fear, however, led to moral paralysis and silenced humour’s redemptive potential. Against this backdrop, the courage of leaders who opposed both oppression and cycles of revenge – often through humour – embodied a spirituality rooted in mercy, justice, and the sanctity of life, demonstrating how laughter can restore, heal, and resist.

7 Neville Alexander, *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002), 81. Willem A. Saayman, *Being Missionary – Being Human: An Overview of the Dutch Reformed Church Family in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2007), 127–28, recounts the extraordinary courage of Nico Smith, a white pastor who intervened to stop a “necklacing” in a black township during the mid-1980s. He notes: “Anybody with any awareness of the degree of anger and hatred alive in the urban black townships of Gauteng in those years will know that for a white man to step into such a situation was as close to suicidal as can be. Because he had won the confidence of even the radical black youth through his sincerity and commitment to their humanity, Nico could do it and survive.”

2.2 Humour as spiritual practice

While communal humour fortified township solidarity, prominent leaders harnessed humour as a deliberate moral and spiritual instrument, shaping resistance at both individual and societal levels. In contrast to the hatred and despair that sometimes accompany resistance, church leaders such as Boesak and Tutu called for consistently pursuing a more radical alternative: moral restraint, humour, and forgiveness.

Boesak, for example, offered one of the most compelling fusions of prophetic faith and political resistance. In his exposition of the Book of Revelation,⁸ he used irony and prophetic critique to interpret the Christian message as an unambiguous rejection of apartheid's ideology and violence. Yet, despite his prophetic urgency, Boesak's vision was also deeply shaped by the spiritual notion of tenderness – what he called the “tenderness of conscience of Jesus.” This tenderness, drawn from passages such as Philippians 2 and Luke 4, expressed God's solidarity with the oppressed and called political leaders to embody compassion rather than coercion. For Boesak, genuine power was inseparable from a spiritual compassion and solidarity; resistance had to mirror not the violence of Caesar but the humility of Christ.⁹

This moral tenderness finds a parallel in Desmond Tutu's use of humour. Where Boesak's prophetic tenderness confronted power through compassionate truth-telling, Tutu's humour performed a similar task. Tutu often employed humour and gentle irony during the sombre proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to defuse tension, humanise the process, and expose absurd justifications. As he recounts in *No Future Without Forgiveness*, laughter sometimes “saved us from being overwhelmed by the horror” (1999, 83), reminding participants that

8 Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

9 Cf. Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984); W. Wessels, “Contemplating Allan Boesak's Fascination with Preaching ‘Truth to Power,’” *Acta Theologica* 37, no. 2 (2017): 188–206, <https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v37i2.11>. Wessels notes that Boesak argued that “politics should possess the tenderness of conscience of Jesus, as expressed in Philippians 2:5–11,” and that this tenderness rejects violence: “It is either nonviolent co-existence or violent co-annihilation.”

forgiveness need not exclude joy. “We are not here for revenge,” he once quipped, smiling, “but that does not mean we can’t enjoy a good laugh at our own expense” (1999, 94). In this way, Tutu transformed humour into a spiritual practice – an act that held truth and compassion in creative tension.¹⁰

If Boesak embodied prophetic tenderness and Tutu incarnated laughter as grace, Nelson Mandela brought these qualities together in the arena of political reconciliation. His humour, too, bore spiritual depth. Disciplined by years of suffering, it became a quiet instrument of healing and dignity. Imprisoned for twenty-seven years, Mandela emerged with his humour intact – a gentle defiance that disarmed both enemies and allies. He joked about his prison wardrobe as a “fashion disaster,” humanising himself and bridging divides. In his public speeches, he often used self-deprecating humour – opening one address by saying, “I am sorry I kept you waiting. I am sure you know that I have a habit of keeping people waiting,” a wry allusion to his long imprisonment that transformed pain into shared laughter.¹¹ Mandela’s humour was not escapist but profoundly moral; it refused bitterness, restored relationships, and modelled the redemptive power of humility.

His friendship with his former prison warder, Christo Brand, which evolved from duty to affection, stands as a living parable of reconciliation. Through humour, Mandela demonstrated that justice and mercy, laughter and forgiveness, belong together in the moral imagination of a healed nation. His humour was both political and spiritual – a refusal to let hatred define his humanity, restoring relationships and offering community.

As Kierkegaard and Niebuhr suggest, humour is not mere amusement but a spiritual mode of perception – an awakened awareness of life’s incongruities that opens the soul to humility and faith. For Kierkegaard, humour marks the moment when irony turns inward and becomes compassionate: it no longer mocks from a distance but enters suffering with tenderness. Niebuhr deepens this vision by calling humour “the prelude to faith,” a grace-filled recognition of human limitation that tempers pride and softens judgment.

10 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

11 Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 749.

In both thinkers, laughter becomes a modest sacrament of redemption – where human folly is exposed yet embraced in mercy.

This vision finds luminous embodiment in the lives of certain twentieth-century leaders who faced oppression without surrendering to hatred. Mandela's dry humour, a quiet thread running through his public and private life, finds an illuminating parallel in the wit of Mahatma Gandhi. Both reveal how spiritual humour becomes an instrument of endurance and reconciliation. Like Mandela, Gandhi used laughter not as an escape but as moral resilience – a kenotic act of self-emptying that transformed pain into grace. His humour, often self-deprecating and disarming, embodied the paradox of strength through humility and resistance without rancour.

As one contemporary observed, “without a strongly developed sense of humour, a capacity to see the funny side of grim reality, Gandhi might not have been able to endure the trials and tribulations of the spirit and the flesh which destiny had prepared for him.” His close associate Sarojini Naidu captured this with characteristic warmth: “Few people realised that Mahatma Gandhi's laughter was the only relieving factor in his life, and he needed to laugh because he was wise. He needed to laugh because he was called upon to bear the world's burden.” Gandhi's laughter, like Mandela's, thus embodied the kind of faith Niebuhr described – a humble acceptance of the world's contradictions without surrendering to cynicism.¹²

The same moral and spiritual radiance of humour – gentle yet defiant, humble yet unyielding – would later find expression in Desmond Tutu's ministry. In him, laughter again became both protest and prayer: a joyful defiance of injustice and a language of grace that kept compassion alive when vengeance seemed easier. Tutu's humour, like Gandhi's and Mandela's, exemplified the ethical and spiritual maturity of one who could hold sorrow and hope in the same breath. Ultimately, spiritual humour restores relationships not only with others – as seen in the reconciliatory laughter of Mandela and Tutu – but also within oneself, transforming suffering into resilience, compassion, and moral insight.”

12 Cf. S. Durai Raja Singam, “The Humour of Gandhi,” *Triveni: Journal of Indian Renaissance* 41, no. 3 (October–December 1972): 30–37, providing an extensive eyewitness account with numerous anecdotes, <https://www.wisdomlib.org/history/compilation/triveni-journal/d/doc70158.html>.

2.3 Roots of spiritual humour

Having seen how laughter functioned as both protest and moral vision in the lives of communities and spiritual leaders under apartheid, we can now turn to its deeper theological roots. Such laughter did not trivialise suffering; it sanctified it. The humour of these leaders invites a turn to the theological roots of laughter itself – how it can become a spiritual discipline of humility, empathy, and grace.

Their laughter was not merely political defiance, but an expression of a spiritual insight long explored in Christian and philosophical thought: that humour can mediate between suffering and grace.

The humour resonates with older reflections on the spiritual nature of laughter. Kierkegaard distinguishes between irony and humour. Irony, he argues, is the detached recognition of the contradiction between appearance and reality; humour, by contrast, confronts these absurdities empathetically, uniting suffering and compassion.¹³ Irony observes tension from a distance; humour enters it. It demands self-involvement, revealing the gap between our ideals and our realities, cultivating humility and existential awareness. Far from mere jest, humour becomes ethical and spiritual – it unmasks self-deception, nurtures compassion and prepares the soul for faith. Laughter arises from acknowledging one's absurdity, replacing arrogance with self-knowledge and despair with solidarity.

Niebuhr extends this moral vision by describing humour as “the prelude to faith.”¹⁴ In *The Irony of American History*, he argues that irony exposes the pretensions of individuals and nations, revealing the incongruity between self-image and reality. When rightly understood, this recognition ceases to be cynical; it becomes humble. Humour transcends irony by accepting the contradictions of life with grace. Laughter thus becomes a spiritual discipline that tempers judgment and awakens mercy. Where

13 Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

14 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 63.

irony acknowledges the limits of human power, humour accepts them in humility; where satire unmasks evil, humour keeps reconciliation possible.¹⁵

Ultimately, humour functioned as a spiritual discipline of self-transcendence, orienting individuals toward the Ultimate. It did not deny suffering but transformed it into hope, relational restoration, and a recognition of a reality beyond the immediate injustices of the world. Laughter emerged as resistance, matured into compassion, and culminated in transcendence – a movement from social defiance to spiritual redemption, grounding human experience in the sacred. As these communities and leaders embodied, inner transformation is not achieved through denial of suffering but through its transfiguration. True laughter does not dismiss pain; it converts it into hope and points toward the Ultimate, affirming both dignity and relationality. Viktor Frankl confirms this perspective: humour is “a vital means of spiritual survival amid suffering,” enabling individuals to momentarily rise above misery, preserve inner freedom, and nurture the relationship with themselves, thus glimpsing the transcendent even in oppressive contexts.¹⁶

3. A conceptual typology of humour in the apartheid era

Building on the understanding of humour as a spiritual practice – ever-present in the struggle, and one that must be intentionally desired and practised – the following section examines its functioning within the apartheid context. This analytical section develops a conceptual typology of political humour in South Africa, identifying diverse forms such as irony, satire, parody, and self-deprecating wit, through which laughter responded to oppression in public and private life. By grouping these forms into meaningful configurations, the analysis clarifies humour’s social, moral, and spiritual significance, while engaging with and extending established

15 Cf. also Houck, “Holiness and Humour,” 47–50, on Niebuhr’s understanding of humour as a disciplined moral and spiritual practice that cultivates humility, exposes self-deception, and prepares the soul for grace.

16 On humour and suffering, cf. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 68, who observes that prisoners in Nazi concentration camps used humour as a vital means of spiritual survival, momentarily rising above misery, affirming their humanity, and transforming pain into dignity and the possibility of transcendence.

distinctions in humour scholarship. The typology demonstrates that humour in apartheid South Africa operated simultaneously as critique, survival strategy, and as spiritual formation. Each form of humour carried political and spiritual resonance, shaping how communities affirmed dignity in the face of systemic dehumanisation, and illustrating its critical role in nurturing and imagining a more humane society.

3.1 Humour in the struggle for justice

Humour, particularly in political contexts, functioned as a relational and ethical resource in the struggle for justice. As resistance humour, it exposes and challenges dominant structures, revealing their destructiveness and dehumanising effects.¹⁷ Historical examples – from Aristophanes’ comedies in classical Greece to Molière’s works in modern Europe – demonstrate humour’s enduring moral and oppositional function in confronting tyranny.¹⁸

Beyond mere critique, humour heightens awareness and fosters a critical consciousness that reorients communities toward alternative possibilities. This recognition generates subtle, creative practices of resistance, enabling people to discover their capacity for self-liberation.¹⁹ In the South African

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- 17 See Jay Donian, “The Comedy Scape in Apartheid South Africa: A Historical Analysis,” *Phronimon* 22, no. 1 (2021): 35–52, <https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/1234>; Lucy Graham, “Performing Resistance: Comedy and Protest in South African Theatre,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 45, no. 3 (2019): 415–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2019.1605223>; Lucy Valerie Graham, “Laughter in the Dark: Humour as Resistance in South African Theatre,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, no. 1 (2003): 215–31; Jennifer Marra, *Humor, Power and Culture: A New Theory on the Experience and Ethics of Humor* (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2019), 34, who describes humour as “a moment of emotional transformation – a safe, shared, intelligent response to *painful, dangerous things* that helps us reframe tension, connect with others, and even heal.”
 - 18 Cf. Sophia A. McClennen and Srdja Popovic, “Laughing in the Face of Oppression: How Humour Can Defy Autocracy,” *D+C: Development and Cooperation*, March 25, 2025. They note that recent examples in Georgia and Mozambique show how humour, combined with creativity and patriotism, can destabilize authoritarian regimes more effectively than anger or aggression.
 - 19 Cf. Paul Krugman, “Talking with Erica Chenoweth: Civil Resistance – Does It Work, and When?” *New York Times*, October 25, 2021. For the concept of “cognitive liberation,” see Doug McAdam, as cited in this discussion. Civil resistance gains power from collective awareness and shared purpose. Erica Chenoweth notes that participants are inspired by the sheer number of people involved and by knowing they are not alone in opposing injustice. Sociologist Doug McAdam calls this “cognitive liberation”: the collective realization that a situation is intolerable, change is possible, and each

context, this perceptive awareness assumes a spiritual and transformative dimension, energising resistance to injustice.

Resistance humour, however, was inherently risky. To survive censorship and repression, it often evolved into subversive humour – intelligible to insiders but opaque to outsiders.²⁰ In multilingual South African townships, people fused languages, customs, and cultural symbols into jokes, songs, and performances that functioned as embodied communal practices, resonating locally while evading authorities.

Music was a particularly effective medium for this subversive, ironic humour, given the centrality of singing in African cultural life.²¹ During protest marches, dialogical singing fostered social cohesion, binding participants together and empowering collective resistance by mocking oppressors. Songs thus became communal and performative sites of critique: intelligible to the oppressed but often misread by authorities. For example, the song *Meadowlands*, with its upbeat melody, ironically conveyed the trauma of forced removals, such as the destruction of Sophiatown. While authorities interpreted it as compliant, black South Africans recognised its sarcasm, irony, and defiance, singing it widely in protests, shebeens, and dance halls.

The resistance also took place through verbal satire in hybrid township languages, such as tsotsitaal,²² which ridiculed apartheid laws and officials:

person has the responsibility and capacity to act. As this understanding spreads, the perception of a fixed status quo dissolves, transforming political realities and fostering hope, affirmation, and joy. In apartheid South Africa, humour functioned similarly: by exposing absurdities, uniting people against oppression, and sustaining hope, it became both a moral and spiritual resource, affirming agency and resilience.

20 Cf. Donian, “The Comedy Scape”; Graham, “Performing Resistance” on the use of humour as a form of resistance in South African theatre and township.

21 On the antiphonal, dialogical character of African protest song, cf. traditional call-and-response structures such as “Senzeni Na?” and “Siyahamba.” Cf. J. G. Tönsing, “Limnandi Evangeli and Hlangani Bafundi...,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017): a4339, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4339>; Michela E. Vershbow, “The Sounds of Resistance...,” *Inquiries Journal* 2, no. 6 (2010): 1–21. This antiphonality reinforced social cohesion and moral unity, transforming performance into a collective act of defiance and hope. Tönsing discusses the seminal place of songs in African culture, listing its cyclical nature, its creativity, its social activity and its use as a political tool.

22 Tsotsitaal (lit. “tsotsi language”) is a township street language that mixes English and Afrikaans with indigenous languages, thereby subverting apartheid language

the pass laws became “dompasses” (stupid passes), police were “platkeps,” and the country’s President P.W. Botha was dubbed the “great crocodile.”²³ This satire and ridicule diminished fear, exposed absurdities, and reinforced communal resilience. At a deeper level it resisted the injustices and cruelties of the political system.

Through ridicule, writers, performers, and communities exposed apartheid’s moral bankruptcy and systemic contradictions. By blending seriousness with playfulness, humour cultivated critical thinking, solidarity, and creativity, transforming suffering into a shared, humanising experience, offering emotional sanctuary, fostering dignity, and empowering resistance. The humour of African townships, in particular, enabled a cognitive shift, allowing individuals to perceive oppressive conditions as surmountable. Singing, dancing, and collective laughter enhanced both agency and joy, reinforcing humour’s relational, spiritual, and even contemplative dimensions. Far from mere defiance, humour cultivated moral and psychological resilience, contributing to both individual and communal flourishing. More profoundly, this humour opened a window onto ultimate reality: it allowed communities to confront injustice without despair, to recognise the enduring dignity of the human spirit, and to glimpse the possibility of moral and spiritual renewal. In this way, resistance humour already anticipates spiritual humour as a deliberate practice: a relational and transformative mode of engagement in which laughter mediates resistance, contemplation, and transcendence.

3.2. Spiritual humour

Humour in this article is understood as a spiritual approach and practice rather than mere emotional release or irrational hilarity. This section

policies. Cf. Rajend Mesthrie, “Societal Multilingualism ...” in *Varieties of English*, ed. Mesthrie (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 318–40; Ellen Hurst-Harosh, “Tsotsitaal and Decoloniality,” *African Studies* (2018): 112–25. She notes that it is part of languages that challenge forms of dominant power and oppression, and for this reason, might be considered as a decolonial practice that resists Eurocentric cultural dominance; C. van der Waal, *The politics of language in post-apartheid South Africa: The case of Tsotsitaal*. *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 35(1–2), 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2012.115000>.

23 Cf. Dan van der Vat, “Obituary: P. W. Botha,” *The Guardian*, November 2, 2006, for a full report on his life and reputation. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/nov/02/guardianobituaries.southafrica>.

argues that spiritual humour functions as a relational, mystical, and ethical practice that transforms both individuals and communities. These qualities characterise the new society that represents the alternative to the abusive and oppressive structures. The argument in this section unfolds in three interrelated movements.

First, spiritual humour nurtures relationships that rehumanise a fractured society through shared vulnerability and mutual dependence. In Tutu's ministry, it emerges from a relational, mystical vision of life. By laughing with others rather than at them, Tutu enacts ubuntu, showing that joy, self-understanding, and resilience arise in community rather than isolation. Houck describes Tutu's humour as a spiritual discipline "rightly used in relationship," capable of healing division and enabling forgiveness. A striking example is Tutu's call for demonstrators to share food and drink with police blocking their march – modelling generosity toward adversaries. In such moments, laughter becomes moral pedagogy, reinforcing interdependence and communal dignity.

Second, this relational dynamic is deepened through a mystical framework. Waaijman notes that mysticism deepens relationality by orienting the self toward the Ultimate and fostering compassion, insight, and joy that flow outward. In this light, spiritual humour – whether expressed through shared laughter, irony, or gentle self-deprecation – operates ethically and mystically, affirming human dignity while offering a glimpse of ultimate reality.²⁴ Mysticism, then, does not withdraw from history but unveils a deeper reality in which grace and responsibility meet. Within this framework, humour participates in this dynamic by creating shared vulnerability, softening enmity, and opening space for encounter, gesturing outward to the neighbour and upward to the divine within a horizon of transcendence.

Third, spiritual humour is grounded in the interplay of grace and justice. At the heart of Tutu's spirituality lies this interplay. Grace – an unearned divine gift – nurtured the contemplative disciplines that sustained him in suffering, while justice grounded these practices, guiding his prophetic

24 Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 207–8, discussing Levinasian ethics as relational responsibility and its relevance to mystical awareness

challenge to apartheid. For Tutu, grace was never passive: it compelled moral action and the defence of human dignity. As he insisted, “We are prisoners of this grace. We are constrained to be merciful, forgiving, compassionate, because we are the beneficiaries of an incredible generosity. We are bound to be caring because we are the recipients of an astonishing caring.”²⁵ This language conveys the inner compulsion of grace, overflowing into compassion, reconciliation, and solidarity.²⁶

From this follows a distinctive form of selfhood shaped by humour.

For Tutu, such laughter expressed awareness of God’s sustaining presence and embodied an ubuntu-shaped vision of the self-held in relationship. By laughing at himself, he practised a spirituality of vulnerability – standing before God and others with openness rather than defensiveness – thereby embodying self-deprecation.

Self-deprecation, in its communal resonance, signals a willingness to set aside pride for the greater good. In the struggle for liberation, this became a form of self-emptying – not erasing identity but surrendering ego for costly, grace-driven resistance to evil. Such humour reminded people that true strength lies in recognising one’s humanity before God and standing with others who share the same dignity.

Finally, these dimensions reveal humour as a formative practice.

Self-deprecating humour is not mere charm but a cultivated spiritual discipline that forms character and directs the heart toward generosity, humility, and joy. Atkinson (2015:22) captures this in describing laughter as a virtue –

25 Religious and spiritual themes surface explicitly in *Woza Albert!* (1981) by Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa, co-created with Barney Simon. The return of Christ – “Morena” – to apartheid South Africa becomes a parable of moral inversion. The Messiah is arrested for not carrying a passbook, exposing the spiritual bankruptcy of a regime that invoked Christianity while violating its essence. The laughter this provokes is not mockery but revelation – a prophetic unveiling of blasphemy disguised as order. The play uses comical figures and biblical language to satirise the cruel, petty, and profoundly unchristian nature of apartheid hypocrisy. This use of humour corresponds to a mystical inversion found in many religious traditions, where divine truth manifests through paradox and irony.

26 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 35; cf. also Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 47.

“an attitude towards oneself and the world” – that can be encouraged and made second nature.

4. Conclusion

Taken together, these dimensions confirm the central claim: humour is a multifaceted spiritual phenomenon – relational, mystical, and ethical in force. Spiritual humour affirms life, restores dignity, nurtures hope, and sustains faith amid oppression and dehumanisation, embodying the power of joy to confront evil and nurture communal flourishing.