

Review essay

## Three Lions, divine comedy and making Jews count: Baddiel and Skinner, then and now

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**Reviewed works:**

Frank Skinner, *A Comedian's Prayer Book* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2021), pp. 112, ISBN 978-1529368956. £9.99

David Baddiel, *Jews Don't Count: How Identity Politics Failed One Particular Identity* (London: TLS Books, 2021), pp. 144, ISBN 978-0008399474. £9.99

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For non-English inhabitants of these islands, for whom the lyric ‘It’s coming home’ has constituted a tiresome soundtrack to international football tournaments since Euro 96, David Baddiel and Frank Skinner must take their share of the blame. They may have to take it again this year, assuming the song still resonates during the rather more controversial World Cup in Qatar, where the backdrop includes a well-documented history of migrant worker exploitation among other human rights offences.<sup>1</sup> And in this tournament, like so many since 1996, Scotland will not be represented. A collaboration with The Lightning Seeds, *Three Lions* was written by Baddiel and Skinner as a lament, punctuated by outbreaks of hope over expectation, rather than the triumphant jingoism for which it

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<sup>1</sup> See the Human Rights Watch 2022 report: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/qatar>.

is sometimes co-opted. Regardless of how one reads their lyrics, during the 26 years since the first release of the track, the comedians and long-time friends have probably been more successful than the various incarnations of the national team who inspired their song. Though not as successful as England's Lionesses, who stole a march on the men's team when they triumphed at the Euros in the summer of 2022, and who now have their own version of the song.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to his live shows, Baddiel is now a popular novelist, playwright, screenwriter, and documentary maker.<sup>3</sup> Skinner's writing and broadcasting spans television and radio, and in more recent times he has emerged as one of the UK's leading popularisers of poetry through his podcast series.<sup>4</sup> Both writers published books in 2021 which speak to issues which are deeply personal to them, and are of interest to a reading public who may not typically be drawn to their work. Religion and race are frequently at the forefront of political discourse and social discord, and the tribal nature of football fandom often lends itself to especially ugly manifestations of prejudice in the domains of both religious and racial identity. Examples of the latter illuminate Baddiel's analysis of an apparent hierarchy of racism which exists within contemporary identity politics, where Jews sometimes appear to hover perilously above the relegation zone. Baddiel's book is certainly not bereft of his characteristic wit, despite its serious subject matter, but we begin with the overtly comedic.



### *A Comedian's Prayer Book*

For those who only know Frank Skinner through his early and decidedly 'adult' stand-up, the comedian may seem like an unlikely author of a prayer book. But Skinner is a cradle Catholic who, in his public life, has a distinctly unapologetic attitude to his faith. In an interview to promote the

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<sup>2</sup> See Elizabeth Aubrey, "The Lightning Seeds and David Baddiel to perform 'Three Lions' in London this week", *NME*, 29 July 2022: <https://www.nme.com/news/music/the-lightning-seeds-and-david-baddiel-to-deliver-special-performance-of-three-lions-3278876>.

<sup>3</sup> Baddiel's own website gives an overview of his career: <https://www.davidbaddiel.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> See Skinner's website, "30 Years of Dirt", a title alluding to the lyrics from *Three Lions* and his comedy: <http://frankskinnerlive.com/>.



book, Skinner recalls an incident at college when a teacher asked the class, ‘How many people here pray?’<sup>5</sup> None of the students put their hands up, and at least one of them was a shy Christian. Skinner regretted this silent conformity almost immediately: ‘I’ve been trying to put my hand up ever since’.

Skinner is conscious that aspects of his work and public persona, juxtaposed with his professed faith, will not sit easily with either some Christians or some of a decidedly secular orientation: the former cannot tolerate the fact that his ‘surface appearance’, as bawdy and foul-mouthed as the best (or worst) of his profession, does not ‘reflect his inner conviction’; while the latter ‘feel betrayed’ when it turns out that the laughs generated by his freewheeling irreverence come from someone of deep religious commitment, the ‘internal belief’ beyond the subversive performance (p. 2). The metaphor Skinner uses for his predicament is the holy fool:

Imagine someone on a pilgrimage, stopping at churches, martyr-related tourist spots and sacred wells, while dressed in medieval jester outfit. The intention is serious and completely devout, but the pilgrim just feels more at home in the motley than in sackcloth and ashes. He feels jest is an integral part of who he is and it seems wrong to deny that part. His whole life – his experiences, thoughts, opinions, beliefs – has been, he believes, defined and enriched by the accompaniment of jesterial bells. (pp. 1–2)

Skinner wears his bells well. The book consists of sixteen unnumbered and untitled prayers, usually with a pithy epigraph. Skinner’s God-talk is reworked for the written word, otherwise the only ‘coping strategy’ for the reader to fall back on would be their experience of *Finnegans Wake* (p. 3). This would likely narrow down the audience. Nevertheless, the prayers are presented as indicative of the themes that characterise the author’s private prayer life: ‘the only area of my life where I am completely free’, where ‘there is no act, there is no front’; prayer, for Skinner, is a place where you can be as ‘profoundly you as you can be’.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Songs of Praise*, BBC1, 18 April 2021; the clip is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Au4MDC71DV&t=205s>.

<sup>6</sup> See n. 5.



The latter point is revealing, focussing as it does on the liberating impact of prayer on the faithful, as a medium of communication characterised by unqualified authenticity. What is evident within these prayers, explicitly so in the first, is Skinner's consciousness of the utter pointlessness of the practice assuming the omniscience of God. The Gospels support this very point, although having made it forcibly (for example in Matthew 6:8) Jesus presses on anyway by offering a model of prayer for others to follow. Skinner also presses on, doubtful that God needs the praise or petitions he has been offered historically, but confident that the One to whom he prays 'is the stillness at the core of me' (p. 14), and therefore more than worth the effort to connect with.

Skinner, unlike some other humorous Christian writers, is unabashed in his traditional eschatological yearnings.<sup>7</sup> The end of the spiritual life is union with God, if all goes well, and damning judgement otherwise. Some will read Skinner as an old-fashioned 'salvation by faith and good works' Catholic; for others, there will be the distinct whiff of the semi-Pelagian in these pages. Skinner worries that his career earnings could count against his salvation – he has that 'camel' and the 'eye of a needle' in mind (Matthew 19:24) – but he thinks that, on balance, his wealth has made him less selfish than when he was on his uppers. Skinner acknowledges that his hitherto discretion when it comes to generous charitable giving, commanded by Christ himself (Mark 10:17–31), has almost certainly cost him an MBE, but if it stores up treasure in heaven, a lifetime of being ignored by the honours committee would be a small price to pay. Unfortunately for Skinner, I fear that his allusion to said charitable work in this bestselling work has fatally undermined his cultivated humility and so, by his own reckoning, makes his passage to the 'good place' less secure than he imagines: we all know what F. Skinner has been doing with his right hand (contra Matthew 6:3).

Skinner, at prayer, is troubled by the supposed reality of hell, but he playfully deconstructs the concept from within. In one reflection he imagines himself in a heaven – yes, without wanting to blow his own trumpet, Skinner suspects that's where he belongs: there are just worse types out there. How high can the bar be? - populated by 'blonde women'

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<sup>7</sup> Compare, for example, Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).



and endless games of ‘frisbee’ (each to their own vision of paradise, I suppose). Here we find him asking, reasonably and endearingly, to see his mother: ‘Frank’, said the initially evasive official, ‘your mum didn’t make it’ (p. 22). Initially surprised by the official’s use of his stage moniker rather than his baptismal name (Christopher), Skinner is more surprised still that his mother, the woman who raised him in the faith, is not among the saved:

I am promised eternal bliss if I’m a good person, but such bliss, knowing that my mother, or anyone else for that matter, smoulders and screams, can only be achieved by an unimaginable amount of callous indifference. Is that what the saved become? Are they raised above human traits like compassion and empathy? I expect supratropical temperatures in the pit, but it now occurs to me that Heaven might be icy cold, with inmates to match. (p. 23)

Skinner’s thoroughly human response to the threat of severance between the saved and damned is also thoroughly theological. There is a clear sense in which Christ’s *descendit ad inferos* is a continuous process for Skinner: ‘He’s down among the unforgivable. Too late for missionary work. Too late even for healing. Just soothing now’ (p. 24). But then Skinner wavers. His is a human response, yes, all too human: while Jesus is still ‘with the sinners’, Skinner, in his cowardice, goes for the frisbee:

The blonde girls shriek. My mother takes her two-hundredth punch to the face and I, in my Glory, try not to think about it. She had her chance. She said no when she could have said yes, or yes when she could have said no. They all did. Let them burn. That’ll be me in Heaven. No one likes a trouble-maker. That’s how you get crucified. (p. 25)

There is a wilful naiveté to Skinner’s faith on these pages, although whether it rises to Paul Ricœur’s ‘second naiveté’ is doubtful. Skinner insists he read every anti-Catholic book he could get his hands on as a young man, and I have no reason to doubt him. Although his own account gives the impression that the fires of criticism through which he has walked have largely been of an ecclesiological kind (even ‘bureaucratic’,<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See n. 5.



by his own telling), rather than, say, working his way through the canons of modern biblical scholarship and philosophical critique. Or perhaps Skinner is cognisant of these challenges but remains unphased. What we can be sure of is that Skinner is a lifelong Elvis fan, who loves the gospel song *I Believe in the Man in the Sky*, in spite of its ‘questionable use of both gender and geography’ (p. 41). Skinner has little time for what I will loosely call ‘liberal theology’ (I doubt he has F. D. E. Schleiermacher or Adolf von Harnack in his sights), wondering as he does whether ‘all religious nuance [isn’t] a sort of apologetics to non-believers’ (p. 42). He understands the reluctance of modern Christians to appear ‘strange’ before the eyes of the secular world, but worries that we have ‘apologised our way out of a ragged and reckless faith [...] into some bland approximation, a sort of belief-lite’. Skinner’s heart may, as he concludes one prayer, be ‘with the man in the sky’ (p. 43), but he has already admitted that he pores ‘obsessively’ over God’s ‘endless complications’ (pp. 41–42).

For all Skinner’s need to retain the ‘child-faith’ (p. 43) – and the scriptural warrant for this attitude is impeccable (Mark 10:15) – one of the things he bemoans in his prayers is the decline in Christian intellectual culture (one can only assume that this genial guide to prayer is not yet a subscriber to *Theology in Scotland*). Skinner is thinking above all of literature, the area of intellectual life with which he is most engaged: ‘It has often bothered me that atheists sit, metaphorically, on a leather Chesterfield in an oak-panelled exclusive club, sharing highbrow insights with George Bernard Shaw and Philip Pullman, while I find myself in Spudulike with Cliff Richard’ (p. 73). Skinner is well read in some of the literary greats from within the Christian fold. He knows more than most about Samuel Johnson, for example, having carried out post-graduate work on the towering man of English letters, and serving as the 100<sup>th</sup> president of The Johnson Society.<sup>9</sup> Skinner traces a lineage of Christian writers from George Herbert and John Milton, via Johnson himself, through to William Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson, Gerald Manley Hopkins, and T. S. Eliot. All ‘trod the rickety bridge’ of Christian commitment and the life of the mind (p. 76). And how deftly they trod. The ranks are probably thinner now, given the secularisation of Western societies during the twentieth century, but Skinner is still too pessimistic,

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<sup>9</sup> See *The Johnson Society (Lichfield)*: <https://johnsonnew.wordpress.com/past-presidents/>.



and certainly too Anglocentric. Even in the restricted domain of the latter, we have had W. H. Auden, J. R. R. Tolkien, Graham Greene, George Mackay Brown, Muriel Spark, R. S. Thomas, Toni Morrison, John Updike. The aforementioned are, admittedly, all dead. But we still have Marilynne Robinson, Ron Hansen, Francis Spufford, Edna O'Brien, Anne Lamott ... (fill in your literary favourites).

For all the jest that abounds in these pages, there is sometimes an eye-watering austerity and earnestness about Skinner's faith. A friend who had lost her father once asked him if he shared her sense that, at her forthcoming wedding, her dad would be 'looking down with a big smile on his face'. Skinner 'said something not committal', while 'a shadow passed across' his friend's face. 'She sought comfort', he acknowledges, 'and I was loath to deliver' (p. 68). For God's sake, Frank, I thought, where's your Benedictine pastoral flexibility? Adapt to your audience, man, adapt! As a member of the Church of Skinner, so to speak, albeit of a later generation, I sometimes reckoned I'd got his number reading these prayers. Here is a fellow child of Rome, I reasoned, who was born when Vatican II was but a twinkle in Cardinal Angelo Roncalli's reforming eye. Now, I am not suggesting that Skinner exclusively attends the Tridentine mass with members of the Society of Pius X. That would be hasty given the absence of any evidence whatsoever. Still, there's something of the pre-conciliar about him, I thought. And then he stuns me with his confession (and I use that word with sacramental intent) of the rarity of his prayers offered to (or, rather, via) the Virgin Mary and the Saints more generally: 'I tend to think it's just you guys, the Trinity, and me' (p. 79). Spoken like a good Presbyterian. You don't know what you're missing, Frank; but yes, St John Boste is almost certainly underutilised as far as duties of intercession go: just 'the sort of counsellor who's likely to have a slot free' (p. 81).

Skinner is unlikely to be invited onto BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* anytime soon, referring as he does to non-Christian traditions (however tongue-in-cheek) as 'the support religions' (p. 52), and praying for the 'lost souls searching for Catholicism' (p. 51). But it would certainly liven things up on that staple of morning broadcasting, satirised on-line as 'Platitude of the Day'.<sup>10</sup> Not that Skinner is hostile to other faiths, but his appreciation is at most inclusivist, not pluralist: 'I like to think it's the same

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://platitudes.home.blog/>.



you at the centre of every religion, just viewed from a different angle, but, suddenly, I'm remembering the golden calf incident' (pp. 14–15). As someone with an unusual sense of mission, Skinner is concerned with the positioning of the Christian faith within the modern spiritual landscape. He worries, for instance, that God has ceded to Asian traditions 'something of a monopoly on religious practice with a strong physical fitness element' (p. 15). He has yoga in mind. One might add tai chi. But with the renewed popularity of pilgrimage in the West,<sup>11</sup> I'd argue that Christianity is still holding its own in low-impact endurance events.

Skinner laments the quality and quantity of the public's exposure to Christianity's central figure, at least from a marketing point of view. Whereas 'TK Maxx has a buddha section' (p. 62), regardless of the number of Buddhists likely to be shopping there, there are no images of Jesus to be found. But you can't really blame them: 'Has an interior designer ever suggested a room needed something torture-themed?' (p. 63). Skinner is well aware that 'Some of these buddhas will no doubt end up in people's back gardens in order to create a bower-of-peace feel', but this serves to make religion more approachable, less 'spiky':

When they think of Jesus in a garden, he's either sweating blood or replacing the severed ear of a hired abductor. [...] I know a crucifix is no mere decoration but if we could come up with a mass-produced Jesus image that was more user-friendly – something that [...] appealed to people outside the Faith – we'd have a foot in the door and maybe a tiny seed in their consciousness. [...] I would love a Laughing Jesus statue in my living room [...] Softly, softly, catchee agnostic. (pp. 63–66)

Once again, the seemingly traditionalist Skinner plays against type, this time with a yearning for something approaching the 'Buddy Christ' in the comic fantasy film *Dogma*.<sup>12</sup> One living room where it seems unlikely that we'll find a laughing Jesus, or any other for that matter, is in the home of Skinner's great friend, neighbour, and inveterate atheist, David Baddiel.

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<sup>11</sup> For a local take, see <https://britishpilgrimage.org/the-bpt/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Dogma*, Dir. Kevin Smith, USA, 1999.







***Jews Don't Count: How Identity Politics Failed One Particular Identity***

The polymathic Jonathan Miller (1934–2019) – theatre director, comedian, clinician, and author – once said: ‘I think of myself, if anything, as just simply a reluctant Englishman. I am Jewish for antisemites and that’s all’;<sup>13</sup> and elsewhere, ‘I’m not prepared to be Jewish in the face of other Jews’.<sup>14</sup> Baddiel shows no reluctance about his Englishness, nor his Britishness, and he is a Jew in the face of anyone whether they are asking or not. Indeed, ‘Jew’ is the one word in his Twitter bio (p. 32): there is a sense that *Jewish* is already too close to an apology, as if the suffix is meant to take the hard edge off an identity that might bring about discomfort in others. Baddiel does not identify as Jewish because Jews are the first children of Abraham, the people of the Book, the people of God. Like Miller he has no affinity with the Jewish faith, and he is not a Zionist, but Baddiel’s account of his own Jewish identity is not exhausted by the *via negativa*. His is a personal, familial, and cultural identity, and a very Anglo-American one at that (more on this below). But his book is not especially autobiographical, at least by the standards of Baddiel, who has always mined his personal life for creative work. One unwanted consequence of Baddiel’s card-carrying Jewishness is the occasional consignment of his work to a ‘special interest’ category:

I have never tried to hide my Jewishness, except on one occasion, involving *The Secret Purposes*. I went into my local Waterstones soon after the book came out in 2004, and saw that it had been placed in something called the Jewish Interest section. I felt a very strong urge to take it out of there and place it somewhere else in the shop. [...] In interviews before *The Secret Purposes* came out, I talked about how it was principally a love story, and as much about British history as about Jewishness. [...] So it was a bit depressing that on the Amazon site for *The Secret Purposes*, under the section People Who Bought This Book Also Bought, you’d find Amos Oz this, Anita Brookner that, various books with Hitler in the title, and

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Miller, interviewed for *Web of Stories: Life Stories of Remarkable People*, 2008: <https://www.webofstories.com/play/jonathan.miller/5>.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, interviewed on *The Dick Cavett Show*, PBS, 1980; the clip can be viewed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2GwIVFE-gs>.



*How to Raise a Jewish Dog* by The Rabbis of the Boca Raton Theological Seminary. (pp. 35–36)

Baddiel may or may not be pleased to know that, at the time of writing, ‘Products Related to This Item’ on Amazon, at least on my account, include Jennifer Jones, *The Calm Down Jar: A Social Emotional, Rhyming, Early Reader Kids Book to Help Calm Anger and Anxiety*; Orlando Figes, *Story of Russia*; and *The Financial Times Guide to Investing*. The connections did not seem immediately obvious to this browser; then again, stereotypes about Jewish anxieties, Jewish wealth, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories originating in Russia, do all feature in *Jews Don’t Count*.

Baddiel begins by addressing the anti-Semitic elephants in the room, before homing in on the less conspicuous creatures of prejudice which most concern him in this cultural moment: a relatively subtle form of prejudice and discrimination experienced by Jews in social and cultural spaces where anti-racism is otherwise taken as an ethical imperative. But anti-Semitism ‘in most people’s minds, puts Jews right in the middle of the sniper’s sights’ (p. 14): first and foremost, the racial hatred and irrational fears of the political far right which reached their apotheosis of wickedness in the Holocaust. Baddiel also addresses the clean-cut ‘alt-right’ version led by Richard B. Spencer in the United States, a ‘prominent Neo-Nazi’ (p. 48) who has attracted ideological fellow travellers from these islands: such as Colin Robertson, the West Lothian former art student who briefly found notoriety when he was exposed as the vlogger behind the *nom de plume* Millennial Woes.<sup>15</sup> While attending alt-right events in the United States, Robertson claimed to have come reluctantly to anti-Semitism: he was slow to appreciate the significance of ‘the Jewish question’: it is after all, the ‘biggest right-wing cliché’,<sup>16</sup> and who wants to be one of those? And yet the lure of this tenacious racism clearly proved irresistible to him.

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<sup>15</sup> See *Millennial Woes: Reactionary Musings from Scotland*: <https://www.millennialwoes.com/>.

<sup>16</sup> The American magazine *The Atlantic* produced a documentary, “Rebranding White Nationalism: Inside the Alt-Right”, which features Colin Robertson, 15 December 2016: <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/510533/rebranding-white-nationalism-inside-the-alt-right/>.

Nor is Baddiel preoccupied with the more overt examples of hard-left anti-Zionism which can spill over into anti-Semitism, although this is closer to his target, given the political tendencies of the latter: compact discussions of the street artist Mear One and Baroness Jenny Tonge serve as case studies. Prompted by this book to reflect on the complex politics of anti-Semitism, I was reminded of an encounter with a retired Australian school teacher, on holiday in the UK. We met on a train when she engaged me in conversation on noticing that I was reading Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Not the most obvious ice breaker, I know, but that's how it started. After listing the various social injustices that she had been 'taking action on' in the last twelve months, she casually admitted that in the wake of the IDF's Operation Pillar of Defense (an eight-day military operation in Gaza in 2012) she had 'vandalised a couple of synagogues'; she was 'so damned angry with Israel'. And no, she wasn't Jewish: a 'baptised Catholic but confirmed atheist', she was keen to point out, along with various political commitments. I am still ashamed that I didn't take her to task, but my dumbstruck face gave the game away: 'Yes, I know', said the septuagenarian, 'some of my friends back home didn't approve'. I was glad to hear that if nothing else.

So if these forms of anti-Semitism are marginal, what takes centre stage? It is, in truth, what is absent that concerns Baddiel, what is missing from the stage on which identity and anti-racist politics plays out: 'something – a concern, a protectiveness, a championing, a cry for increased visibility, whatever it might be – not being applied to Jews' (p. 14). It is the refusal, or even the hesitancy, by some self-defined progressives to recognise Jews as the (often) vulnerable minority they have surely been for at least as long as the diaspora has existed. Baddiel acknowledges the objections that many have to the acronym BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), but it is fair to say that, for a while at least, it enjoyed widespread use by progressives and across governmental institutions. The designation has fallen even further out of favour since Baddiel published his book.<sup>17</sup> But insofar as it briefly served as a useful catchall for ethnic minorities, BAME was an umbrella term under which Jews should have naturally found shelter. And yet Baddiel detects within

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<sup>17</sup> See, from the Race Disparity Unit, "Why We No Longer Use the Term 'BAME' in Government", 7 April 2022: <https://equalities.blog.gov.uk/2022/04/07/why-we-no-longer-use-the-term-bame-in-government/>.



our culture, however popular or rarefied, a sense that Jews don't really belong there. He invokes the concept of 'Schrödinger's Whites, a brilliant conceit', which Baddiel makes no claim to inventing, whereby 'Jews are white or non-white depending on the politics of the observer' (p. 51). For Baddiel, 'being white is not about skin colour, but security' (p. 43). He has not always felt secure as a Jew in the UK, having been physically attacked on more than one occasion (in one case having been mistaken for a Pakistani), and argues that this sense of being unsafe is widespread among Jews in today's Europe. The evidence he marshals in a short book is impressive. Some of it will be familiar to readers, involving as it does household names, and some less so. Baddiel takes in examples from literature, including an *Observer* review of the debut novel by Charlie Kaufman; television, and the casting of non-Jewish actors as Jewish characters (e.g. in *The Marvellous Mrs. Maisel*); sport, and the use of the 'Y-word' about Tottenham Hotspur FC, and, bizarrely, David Cameron, who felt moved to defend the right of fans to use it of themselves; comedy theatre (*Falsettos*); and politics, including anti-Semitism within the Labour party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, and the exploitation of it by political opponents. The substance of Baddiel's case was thoroughly convincing, and I can add little by way of praise that the book hasn't already received. So for the remainder of this review, I will concern myself with select strands of the argument and suggestive examples, before pondering whether a passage from the writings of his old flat-mate, Mr Skinner, might make a second edition of Baddiel's book.

In *Jews Don't Count*, examples of anti-Semitism in literature range over some of the usual suspects, such as Dickens and Eliot: dead white men who are relatively safe to criticise. But then there are altogether more awkward examples, such as Alice Walker, the African-American Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and icon of the civil rights and womanist movements. Walker is also an avowed fan of the work of David Icke, one of the most influential conspiracy theorists in the world. Icke's fantastical interpretations of global politics, often delivered in an affectless, matter-of-fact way, bewitching many unsuspecting seekers of 'truth and meaning', have at their base anti-Semitic motifs which are firmly rooted in the tradition of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.<sup>18</sup> Walker is also the

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<sup>18</sup> The Протоко́лы сио́нских му́дрцево́в began to appear in print in early twentieth-century Russia. In some versions the text purports to document protocols



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author of the self-published poem “It Is Our (Frightful) Duty to Study the Talmud” (2017), which is simultaneously an expression of bemusement at being thought of as anti-Semitic by critics – ‘The first time I was accused/ Of appearing to be anti-Semitic/ The shock did not wear off/ For days’<sup>19</sup> – and a compelling piece of evidence in support of the thought that she might be:

Is Jesus boiling eternally in hot excrement,  
For his “crime” of throwing the bankers  
Out of the Temple? For loving, standing with,  
And defending  
The poor? Was his mother, Mary,  
A whore?  
Are Goyim (us) meant to be slaves of Jews, and not only  
That, but to enjoy it?  
Are three-year-old (and a day) girls eligible for marriage and  
intercourse?  
Are young boys fair game for rape?  
Must even the best of the Goyim (us, again) be killed?  
Pause a moment and think what this could mean  
Or already has meant  
In our own lifetime.

Walker does not answer these questions herself in the poem, but the implication is that the Talmud, the most authoritative collection of Jewish legal teachings, answers them in the affirmative, and that this provides clues to the driving force behind our current political predicaments:

For the study of Israel, of Gaza, of Palestine,  
Of the bombed out cities of the Middle East,  
Of the creeping Palestination

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emerging from a (fictitious) Zionist Congress held in Basel in 1897, which reveal Jewish plans to take control of the global economy and the international political order. It was exposed as a forgery by the journalist Philip Graves writing in *The Times* (1921): see, Esther Webman, *The Global Impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century-Old Myth* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 13.

<sup>19</sup> The full poem is available on *Alice Walker: The Official Website*: <https://alicewalkersgarden.com/2017/11/it-is-our-frightful-duty-to-study-the-talmud/>.



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Of our police, streets, and prisons  
In America,  
Of war in general,  
It is our duty, I believe, to study The Talmud.  
It is within this book that,  
I believe, we will find answers  
To some of the questions  
That most perplex us.

Baddiel juxtaposes these unhinged associations between a fourteenth-century religious text and contemporary social and political history, with the utterances of a Black British woman, the actor Seyi Omooba. In Omooba's case, an archaic religious text was also used to justify an offensive judgement, which this time concerned the status of homosexuality: 'It is clearly evident in I Corinthians vi, 9–11 what the Bible says on this matter. I do not believe you can be born gay, and I do not believe homosexual practice is right' (p. 8). For publicly expressing this 'anti-gay' stance, Omooba was stripped of a lead role in a 2019 musical production of *The Color Purple*, Walker's most celebrated work. Baddiel is 'not interested, for the purposes of this book, in the overall rights and wrongs of cancel culture. But what is important, for the purposes of this book, is that Omooba was cancelled, at least as far as the show was concerned, for homophobia' (p. 7). Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, did not get cancelled, despite her 'anti-Jewish' position being the more 'powerfully expressed of the two [prejudiced] positions' (p. 8).

The key point, for Baddiel, is not that *The Color Purple* ought to be cancelled, but the absence of any conversation: there was no real question of the production being withdrawn. There is, of course, an obvious difference between firing a replaceable actor (however talented) and 'cancelling' the work of art they are performing, but this kind of debate does already exist around the place of authors (and their novels) on school and university curricula. And the debate on Walker has moved on since Baddiel published *Jews Don't Count*, with a number of full-blooded denunciations and disinvitations.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the dial on this whole debate

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<sup>20</sup> See Caitlin Flanagan, "What *The New Yorker* Didn't Say About a Famous Author's Anti-Semitism: Why Are Alice Walker's Vile Beliefs About Jews Treated so Gently?", *The Atlantic*, 29 April 2022: <https://www.theatlantic.com/>

is shifting, something Baddiel acknowledges with reference to the recent British reckoning with the anti-Semitism of Roald Dahl. And more recently we have witnessed the spectacular demise, in social standing and wealth, of the musician and designer Kanye West after a slew of antisemitic remarks.<sup>21</sup>

As an atheist and non-Zionist, Baddiel will sometimes find that critics, perhaps unfamiliar with the diversity of Jewish culture, struggle to locate his Jewishness. He provides an illuminating explanation of his identity:

I am a British person – a Jew, yes, but my Jewish identity is about Groucho Marx, and Larry David, and Sarah Silverman, and Philip Roth, and *Seinfeld*, and Saul Bellow, and pickled herring, and north London seders, and my mother being a refugee from the Nazis, and wearing a yarmulke at my Jewish primary school – and none of that has anything to do with a Middle Eastern country three thousand miles away. (pp. 91–92)

According to Baddiel, to assume he cares about Israel ‘more than any other country’ is ‘racist’. He acknowledges that some find his attitude ‘callous’, thinking that he ‘should care more about the Palestinians’ (p. 92). But that wasn’t this reader’s immediate reaction. While taking it as a given that one should care about the lives of Palestinians living under occupation, I wondered why, in a book called *Jews Don’t Count*, the author shows such indifference to the largest single concentration of Jews on the planet. And as if to cement the idiosyncratic and parochial nature of his outlook on Jewish identity, Baddiel goes on to claim that

Israelis *aren’t* very Jewish anyway, as far as my relationship with

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ideas/archive/2022/04/alice-walker-anti-semitism-new-yorker-essay/629711/; and Avi Shafran, “Disinventing Alice Walker is Not Cancel Culture”, *Religion News Service*, 4 April 2022: <https://religionnews.com/2022/04/04/disinventing-alice-walker-is-not-cancel-culture/>.

<sup>21</sup> *Forbes* magazine provide a detailed timeline of key events, between 03 October and 04 November 2022, as West’s financial worth is estimated to have declined by \$1.6 billion: Marisa Dellatto, “Kanye West’s Antisemitic, Troubling Behavior—Here’s Everything He’s Said In Recent Weeks”, 04 November 2022: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marisadellatto/2022/11/04/kanye-wests-anti-semitic-troubling-behavior-heres-everything-hes-said-in-recent-weeks/?sh=61154d385e8f>.

*Review essay: Three Lions, divine comedy and making Jews count*

Jewishness is concerned. They're too macho, too ripped and aggressive and confident. As I say of them – or, to be precise, Lenny, a Jewish-American taxi driver character I invented for my film *The Infidel*, says of them – ‘Jews without angst, without guilt. So not really Jews at all.’ (p. 92)

As a Jew, Baddiel has a liberty to parse his ethnic identity in a way that would be inappropriate for Gentiles, but one wonders if this is a case of ‘Schrödinger’s Whites’ at work again: in so far as Israelis are perceived to be ‘safe’ (the voices of dissent on this will be loud in some quarters), they are therefore in some sense ‘white’ and ‘privileged’ (according to Baddiel’s definitions), whereas Baddiel identifies more with the unsafe (and therefore non-white) Jews of twenty-first-century Europe. Some could take the latter as supportive of the vitriol that Israeli Jews receive, which is not something Baddiel himself would endorse: on the contrary, he explicitly defends the right of Zionists to make their case and calls out anti-Semitism when he detects it in their critics. But one can imagine the toxic reception of seemingly throwaway lines like ‘not really Jews at all’, said of Israeli Jews and, indeed, the Jewish friends of Israel abroad.

One of the questions which the book engages with is the liberty which is sometimes taken in speech about Jews, and the representation of Jews, in creative and political contexts by people not belonging to that ethnic group. For example, Baddiel identifies a tendency to correct the ethnic transformation of Jesus into a white European over the last two thousand years by declaring him to be ‘a black man’ (p. 81): a well-meaning overcompensation by the Anglican Archbishop of York, no doubt, but no more precise than the original misrepresentation. One of the advances of biblical scholarship over the last fifty years has been not only an insistence on the Jewishness of the historical Jesus as a point of fact, but the development of more sensitive and nuanced treatments of the ancient Jewish cultural and religious contexts in which Jesus is rightly located. One joke from Skinner’s book gave me pause for thought here. To say the least, he underplays Jesus’ ethnicity when referring to his ‘Jewish connections’, but Skinner also conjures up an imaginary scenario where Jesus appears to him. In this scene Skinner wonders whether Jesus would announce to him ‘I’m already here’ or, given those ‘Jewish connections’, he would say, ‘I’m here, already’ (pp. 56–57). On one level this joke works as an absurdist translation of Jesus, a first-century Aramaic-speaking Jew, from





Galilee, into the locutions of modern North American English (I'm guessing Jesus is a New Yorker in this imaginary scene). That is how I initially read it, anyway. But then I wondered: Would this (subtle) play on stereotypical patterns of speech, associated with popular cultural representations, be allowed to pass in relation to other ethnic minorities? Probably not. We can be confident, however, that Skinner will not have been engaged in a Twitter spat about the joke with his old friend: whereas Baddiel is a veteran of the Twitter-sphere, Skinner is nowhere to be found. But since the two still live on the same street in London,<sup>22</sup> dialogue is but a stroll away.



### Extra Time

There are few people in British public life today who I would prefer to have on my side of an argument than Baddiel: reasonable, humane, and self-critical as he is. And there are still few people in Britain as reflexively and instinctually funny as Skinner, who wears his considerable learning lightly. And it is refreshing to read comic writing within a religious worldview, alongside that well-honed tradition which stands outside any faith tradition. Skinner's love of poetry comes through in the composition of his prayers, which are elegantly crafted. Although an editor should probably have saved him from his description of the Holy Spirit as the 'wind beneath my wings' (p. 84). Baddiel also writes well, as is befitting a book published by the *TLS*: his spare but arresting prose carry an argument forward which is intelligent and eminently accessible. There are no chapters or subheadings in the book (apart from a Coda), however, which gives the text a breathless quality, although it is broken up occasionally by images of screen grabs (from Twitter). I also listened to the audio version, and the book works well as a verbal essay. No wonder Channel 4 have commissioned a documentary based on the book.<sup>23</sup> I hope

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<sup>22</sup> During the winter lockdown of 2021, Baddiel wrote: 'Just been round to Frank Skinner's doorstep to wish him Happy Birthday. He's 64. I do still need him, but I'm not feeding him, and that's final': <https://twitter.com/baddiel/status/1354838142545784832?lang=en-GB>.

<sup>23</sup> See <https://www.channel4.com/press/news/channel-4-commissions-david-baddiel-jews-dont-count>. The documentary was broadcast on 21 November 2022 and made available online for a limited period at <https://www.channel4.com/programmes/david-baddiel-jews-dont-count>.



the latter speaks to an even larger audience, beyond those who ‘consider themselves on the right side of history’ (the target audience for the book, as stated on the dust jacket). If we are to fight anti-Semitism effectively, and racism more generally, we must surely reach beyond a self-regarding liberal commentariat who spend an inordinate amount of time arguing with each other on social media.

There will be many more media outlets offering sideways glances at the World Cup this year than were available in the 1990s, but for my generation, I doubt any will be as entertaining as *Fantasy Football League* and its tournament specials. The latter was also associated, it must be admitted, with a certain laddish culture which has not aged well, and its stars have had their own issues with near-the-knuckle humour which arguably crossed the line into bullying, and involved the use of racist tropes, for which the pair have expressed regret and shame.<sup>24</sup> Baddiel and Skinner have come a long way since the ’90s, whether the world has is another matter.

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<sup>24</sup> See Baddiel, *Jews Don’t Count*, pp. 69–70; and Tim Jonze’s interview with Skinner, “There’s Never Been a Time When You Could Just Say Anything”, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jul/25/frank-skinner-standup-comic-free-speech-poetry-comedy-laddish-image>.