
Theology and Humor

by Fred D. Layman

Any attempt to analyze humor may be confronted with a dilemma at the outset. The analytical function requires that the left hemisphere of the brain become operative. But recent brain research points to the right hemisphere as the laugh center and source of humor in human life. One study discovered that patients who had experienced damage to the right side of the brain found nothing amusing in jokes that convulsed other people. Norwegian scientists found that when they placed electrodes on patients' heads and then made them laugh, the electrical activity in the right hemisphere of the brain differed from that in the left. The right hemisphere has been linked to emotion and affective functions and is holistic in its processes. The left hemisphere by contrast is connected with rational functions and is more analytical and piecemeal in its processes.¹

This quite possibly is the reason that analyses of humor are notoriously unfunny. E.B. White has written, "Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."² The complexity of humor led the philosopher Henri Bergson to conclude that "humor escapes science."³ D.H. Munro began his book *Argument of Laughter* with the statement, "Laughter is one of the unresolved problems of philosophy."⁴ Alfred North Whitehead's observation that "the total absence of humor from the Bible . . . is one of the most singular things in all literature,"⁵ may have been as much a perceptive problem in the mathematician-turned-philosopher as in the Bible itself. Max Eastman reached the conclusion that "there is no subject besides God, toward which the analytic mind has ever advocated so explicit and particular a humility."⁶

Nonetheless, the apparent difficulty has rarely deterred the thinkers. Plato and Aristotle were already discussing the relative merits of tragedy and comedy before the Christian era, assigning the

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more noble role to the former.⁷ In more recent times, the nature and meaning of humor have been addressed by Søren Kierkegaard,⁸ Herbert Spencer,⁹ Sigmund Freud¹⁰ and Henri Bergson.¹¹ In addition to the philosophical and psychological disciplines, humor has been studied from the literary, sociological, physiological and linguistic perspectives.

The religious disciplines, by contrast, have rarely considered the subject of humor. This seems strange, especially if Conrad Hyers is correct when he says that “human existence as such may be defined as a running interplay between seriousness and laughter, between sacred concerns and comic interludes.”¹² This neglect, for him, is to leave half of human life in theological oblivion, resulting in a distortion of the other half. Theology has carried on a serious dialogue with science, philosophy and literature, much to its profit. Furthermore, an extensive theological literature exists which treats the other aspects of human subjective functions — rational, volitional and affective. The subject of grief alone has received considerable attention from the theologians for more than a decade now. But not humor! Graeme Garrett laments the fact that, “theology, it seems, is a sombre matter. To the humorist it has little or nothing to say, and from the humorist — to its loss — it seems to have nothing to learn.”¹³

Sources of the Negative Attitude Toward Humor

Several explanations for the attitude toward humor found rather generally in religion¹⁴ have been proposed. Some have wondered whether it might have something to do with the type of mind which is commonly attracted to the study, writing and teaching of theology. Sten Stenson generalizes that philosophers and theologians “have often been witless spectators of religion” who are incapable of appreciating the nature of humor.¹⁵ A high investment in logical, linear, abstract thought processes may have the effect of inhibiting the experience of the artistic, the emotional, the humorous side of human existence. As Jackson Lee Ice has put it, “the very nature of the subject often waylays us before we can get a cognitive knee on its chest.”¹⁶ Humor is thus summarily dismissed as containing nothing of profound importance and as too frivolous for serious minds and legitimate scholarship.

Other authors have pointed to the religious heritage within Protestantism as the source for the negative evaluation of humor.

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David Redding and Paul K. Jewett, who share the Reformed perspective, have spoken of Puritanism and its effect on subsequent Protestantism. As Redding states the matter, “Critics unjustly trace to Jesus the depressing graveyard atmosphere that sometimes haunts the church. The men who really killed joy wore pointed three-cornered hats and buckled shoes.”¹⁷ He adds, “Frankly, this grinning generation doesn’t respect its forefathers enough, but those grim greybeards do deserve the blame for taking the fun out of religion.”¹⁸ Jewett concurs:

Our Puritan forefathers were more than suspicious of humor. Life for them just was not funny. For example, Richard Baxter, who authored *A Serious Call to the Unconverted* — and several hundred other items — never penned a light line. The archives of homiletics not only reveal that the Puritans did not joke when they preached, but they preached against jokes.¹⁹

True to their heritage, the modern descendants of the Puritans altered the lines of “Old Hundredth” (Psalm) in the Geneva Psalter, from “Him serve with *mirth*, His praise forthtell,” to “Him serve with *fear*, His praise forthtell.”²⁰

This leaven from Puritanism permeated other churches and theologians beyond Calvinism. In 1676 the Quaker Robert Barclay wrote his *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*. Proposition XV in the *Apology* was titled “Concerning Salutations and Recreations, etc.”²¹ It is a defense of strict moral and religious solemnity. In addition to a repudiation of the moral vices which Christianity has opposed since New Testament times, Barclay also inveighed against such practices as tipping the hat in greetings, bowing before people as a form of salutation, and the use of such complimentary titles as Your Majesty, Your Honor, Your Holiness. Such actions belong to the vain pomp of this world and are therefore unchristian. In regard to recreation and humor, Barclay insisted,

It is not lawful to use games, sports, plays, nor among other things comedies among Christians, under the notion of recreations, which do not agree with Christian silence, gravity and sobriety; for laughing, sporting, gaming, mocking, jesting, vain talking, etc., is not Christian liberty

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nor harmless mirth. . . .²²

John Wesley shared a good deal of this kind of outlook, perhaps coming from the Puritan side of his heritage. Classes at his Kingswood school met every day except Sunday. He permitted no play for the children at the school, on the principle that “. . . he that plays when he is a child will play when he is a man.”²³

Well into the nineteenth century at least, the Methodists generally were a serious lot. The *General Rules*, first laid down by Wesley for the societies, served as a guide in moral and religious matters. Among the things discouraged by the rules are “such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus.” The difficulty historically has been with the application of the rules. From time to time, commentaries on, and interpretations of, the *General Rules* have been published, together with directions on their application to existing social practices. In 1851, the Rev. Moses M. Henkle wrote a book bearing the title *Primary Platform of Methodism, or Exposition of the General Rules*, which was published by the Southern Methodist Book Concern at Louisville, Ky. The Rev. Henkle listed such activities as singing secular songs, reading novels, attendance at dramatic or comedic theatres or circuses, playing billiards, cards or dice, hunting, fishing or fowling for sport, dancing, horse racing and gambling as being in violation of the *General Rules of Methodism*. Interestingly, the author, writing in the decade leading up to the Civil War, equivocated on the appropriateness of Methodists holding slaves.²⁴ Another book titled *Popular Amusements*, by the Rev. J.T. Crane of the Newark Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and containing an introduction by Bishop E.S. Janes, was published in 1869. Rev. Crane added attendance at baseball games and playing chess to the list of unacceptable activities for Methodists.²⁵

These are a few examples to show how widely pervasive the Puritan²⁶ attitude toward humor and play became within Protestantism. The discomfort with the comic side of existence is reflected in an almost reflexive rejection of any new amusement or pastime which comes on the social scene. Also evident was an apparent difficulty in differentiating between vices which have been regarded as sinful since the New Testament times and simple pleasures which involve no harm. Even more importantly, there was a lack of comprehension of the positive value of humor, play and pleasure in human life, or in

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the context of the divine intent. Eugene Fisher is not certain whether this state of affairs emanates from Puritanism alone or whether it has more distant roots in ancient Manichaeism. But the result is the same. “It teaches that what is human is suspect, that what is fun has no place in the Christian life.”²⁷ James McCord, lamenting that part of the tradition from our forefathers which has included petty literalisms, legalisms and pious veneer, adds cryptically, “The old-time religion, which some are always trying to reinstate, leaves the redeemed man no better off after he is saved. He knows then that if he enjoys doing something it must be sinful.”²⁸ Wilbur Mullen, writing from the Wesleyan holiness perspective, likewise notes that the works of the traditional theologians which have come down to us are “notoriously grim.” He adds:

It is regrettable that moral earnestness rather than expressive joy has become the dominant motif of the kingdom. . . . Holiness without humor may be a “clean, well-lighted place,” but trivial and boring. I would not go so far as to say that it is more important that theology be amusing than that it be true. But one wonders if theology can claim to be true if it is not also interesting and permeated with comic sense.²⁹

We’re discussing the possible sources for the negative attitude toward humor in the church and among the theologians. I have taken the time up to this point to speak about Protestantism on the assumption that most persons who will be reading this essay belong to that tradition. But other interpreters find evidence of this kind of outlook in the Roman Catholic tradition as well. Some point to early Catholic asceticism and its world denial as a source.³⁰ The Fathers of the church had the responsibility of educating the populace of the Greco-Roman world in Christian discipline and the seriousness of Christian behavior. Ambrose exhorted the clergy under his charge that “joking should be avoided even in small talk, so that some more serious topic is not made light of.” He maintained that “not only loose jokes, but jokes of any kind must be avoided — except perhaps when our words are full of sweetness and grace, not indelicate.” In Augustine’s estimate, “The pleasures of the table, of playing and joking, break down manly dignity and seriousness.” According to Chrysostom, “This world is not a theatre, in which we can laugh; and

we are not assembled together in order to burst into peals of laughter, but to weep for our sins. . . . It is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the devil.”³¹ St. Benedict, in his tenth and eleventh grades of humility, warned his fellow monks against laughter. Peter Damiani, the monk who became a cardinal, confessed that the sin which he found most difficult to uproot was laughter.³² Aquinas considered these sayings from the Fathers, but he was more influenced by Aristotle to stress a balanced mean between coarse humor and a boorish seriousness.³³

Finally, an even more distant source for the negative attitude toward humor may be found in Greek philosophy, especially in Plato and Aristotle. We noted earlier³⁴ that both Plato and Aristotle discussed the relative merits of tragedy and comedy. They concluded that tragedy portrays mankind as more noble than it is, while comedy depicts the race as worse than it is. That being the case, tragedy was assigned a noble role while humor was relegated to an inferior status. When Christian theologians later appropriated the Greek tradition as a partner in theological reflection, they drew primarily on the theme of tragedy and reinforced it with the biblical motif of suffering. This resulted in a negative stance toward humor, play and the comic understanding of the human situation such as we have traced in Roman Catholicism and in Protestantism. All of this in turn has been reinforced in modern times by the dominant philosophical mood of our era — existentialism — with its emphasis on meaninglessness, absurdity, anxiety and despair, which has been filtered through contemporary art, literature and theatre down to the grassroots of our culture. Hyers equates the kind of existentialism found in Jean-Paul Sartre with the Augustinian and Reformed doctrine of total depravity, referring to both as “misguided ultraseriousness.”³⁵

The cumulative result has been a one-sided emphasis on the serious, at the expense of humor, laughter, joy and play. Taboos have been erected around the sacred which involve the repudiation of comedy and humor. They belong to the lower end of the hierarchy of emotions and are not suitable for times of worship or the gravity of Christian devotion.³⁶ In the process, the melancholic personality becomes the determinate for measuring the quality of Christian sanctity.

In the last half of this essay I want to propose some theological perspectives for the consideration of humor. I will couple these perspectives with contemporary physiological and psychological

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insights where they are applicable. The limits of this study do not permit me to deal with the sinful potential of humor. Like every other human subjective function, humor may have sinful expressions.³⁷ I don't want to be misunderstood as indiscriminately advocating any and every kind of humor. I find myself in agreement with biblical insights in this regard, as well as with much that the church has criticized. But the sinful aspects of humor have had extensive discussion for several centuries. I wish rather to consider the neglected side of the matter, i.e., the positive role of humor for human life, including religious devotion. I will develop the theme under five theses.

The Positive Role of Humor

Thesis One: Humor Resides in the Nature of God.

When I read the classical theologies on the attributes of God, I'm about equally amazed with what is included and what is excluded. We learn a great deal, for instance, about God's holiness and how it is expressed in divine anger and judgment against infringements of moral government. But the sources are deafeningly silent about the possibility that divine humor may be an aspect of God's love and a quality of divine mercy. Wilbur Mullen has pointed out the inconsistency involved here: "To the classic attributes of God," he says, "orthodox theology has implicitly added the attributes of solemnity, gravity, and austerity. The other face of God, if reflected in the face of Jesus Christ, would suggest felicity, gaiety, and considerable leniency."³⁸

A more perceptive kind of theology, in my estimation, has directed attention to the objective basis for perceiving humor in the divine nature. Some interpreters proceed on an inductive basis. They note that three passages in the Psalms (2:4; 37:13; 59:8) have God laughing. In all three passages, His is the laugh of derision at the comic pretensions of the nations which exalt themselves against Him. The divine humor is thus expressed in irony in confrontation with human sinfulness.

Three other Old Testament passages refer to the playfulness of God. In Psalm 104:26, God is said to have made the sea creature to play with it.³⁹ Georg Bertram remarks, "Psalm 104:26 makes it possible to introduce the idea of play into the doctrine of God, into theology in the narrower sense."⁴⁰ The forty-first chapter of Job lists a series of things which are possible for God but not possible for Job.

Verse 5 implies that God plays with the crocodile. ⁴¹ Proverbs 8:30ff. speaks of wisdom as God's craftsman in the creation, delighting God and playing before Him all the while, playing on the surface of His earth.⁴²

That is the extent of the biblical language about laughter and play in God. ⁴³ The divine humor, like many of the other aspects of God, remains largely hidden. Thus G.K. Chesterson observed, "There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth."⁴⁴

The divine humor is more apparent in the incarnate Christ, although, as Elton Trueblood has indicated, "our capacity to miss this aspect of His life is phenomenal."⁴⁵ He continues, "A misguided piety has made us fear that acceptance of his obvious wit and humor would somehow be mildly blasphemous or sacrilegious."⁴⁶ Jerry Gill has stated the matter succinctly:

Jesus frequently uses puns, answers questions with questions of his own, and engages in "off beat," seemingly irrelevant and non-verbal behavior. More importantly, both the context and content of his remarks are such as to demand being read with raised eyebrows, dancing eyes, and some form of smile. If not so read they would almost certainly come across as crude, evasive, and even offensive — both to the hearer and to the reader.⁴⁷

Other theologians have addressed the question of humor in God from a deductive approach. Here the principle of analogy is sometimes used: that which has potential existence in human life, has absolute existence in God; that which has partial or imperfect existence in human life, has perfect existence in God. In this case, the presence of humor in creatures points toward a fullness of that characteristic in God. Reinhold Niebuhr remarked in passing, "God is not frequently thought of as possessing a sense of humor, though that quality would have to be attributed to perfect personality."⁴⁸ Jackson Lee Ice gives the argument an anthropomorphic twist:

If we attribute the powers of creativity, thought, feeling, desire, love, hate and will to God, why not the power of mirth? We speak of God suffering, why not laughing? . . . A

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Supreme Being devoid of the healthy ability to see the humorous, to be amused . . . would be defective, if not demonic. Certainly, a human being lacking these sensibilities would be considered deficient.⁴⁹

Thesis Two: God Affirms Humor in Human Experience.

Several biblical passages speak of God giving or causing laughter in human life. Sarah's laugh of unbelief was replaced by her laughter of ecstasy following the birth of her promised son, Isaac ("Laughter"), and she exclaimed, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me"(Gen.21:6). The theology of Bildad the Shuhite was not contrary to the biblical revelation when he told Job, "Behold, God will not reject a blameless man, nor take the hand of evildoers. He will yet fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouting" (Job 8:20ff.). In one of the Songs of Assent used in the worship of the Old Testament, the people sang, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy . . ." (Ps. 126:1-2a). In His Beatitudes, our Lord promised, "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21).

It is because God has affirmed humor that laughter and humor are viewed positively in several biblical passages. The writer of Proverbs in particular seems to have reflected a good deal on the positive aspects of humor. He tells us, "A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance" (15:13), that "a cheerful heart has a continual feast" (15:15). The therapeutic effect of humor was already recognized, as evidenced by the statement that "a cheerful heart is a good medicine" (17:22).

Even beyond such proof texts, a joy of life particularly pervades the Old Testament. Theodore Vriezen has pointed to the spontaneity and exuberance manifested in its pages. "Old Testament piety," he says, "contains an element of joy of living, of appreciation of earthly goods which seems most attractive to us nowadays. There is an air of naive religious joy of living in nearly all the Old Testament . . ."⁵⁰

Humor takes many forms in the pages of Scripture, including jokes, humorous riddles and proverbs, puns, irony, and satire.⁵¹ Eugene Fisher's observation is that "the Hebrew Scriptures are filled with a sense of playfulness, especially with the language. Often the point of a passage depends on the reader's appreciation of an outrageous pun. Satire, gentle wit and even farce abound in almost

every book.”⁵²

The humor in the Bible thus runs the full gamut from the laughter of religious joy, to chatty banter on social occasions, to riddles at parties, to satire and irony. Each form of humor is affirmed and each has its appropriate place.

Thesis Three: Humor Is an Essential Part of Being Human.

Humor is not something foreign to the human or a result of the fall. Rather, it is intrinsic to human nature and plays an important role in our physiological, psychological and spiritual health. As such, our humor sets us apart from the rest of creation equally as much as our rational capacities.⁵³ Ice highlights this distinction when he says,

Man is the only animal that weeps and laughs and *knows* that he weeps and laughs, and wonders why. He is the only creature that weeps over the fact that he weeps, and laughs over the fact that he laughs. He is the most humor-seeking, humor-making and humor-giving species that has walked the earth, ever ready to provoke and be provoked with laughter; even in the midst of fear and pain he is capable in incongruously ameliorating his misery by a smile, a pun, or joke.⁵⁴

Physiological studies have shown that laughing is a way our physical organisms have of releasing stored-up kinetic energy, and that in turn has psychosomatic implications. Two psychiatrists, formerly at the Yale School of Medicine, developed a mirth-response test to assess the role of humor in personality. They found that responses to humor were good clues for determining emotional health. In their test group they found that humor gave rise to anxiety, anger and feeling of abhorrence in maladjusted individuals, at the same time that it functioned to reduce anxiety in healthy personalities. Their study demonstrated Freud’s insight that the basic element in all humor is the reduction of anxiety.⁵⁵

Norman Cousins has recently been instrumental in stimulating scientific discussion on the role of laughter in physical health. In 1964 he came down with a degenerative spinal condition which normally progressively immobilizes the whole body and terminates in death. After a period of traditional medical treatment involving large doses of pain-killing drugs and sleeping pills, during which his physical condition and mental outlook continued to deteriorate, he recalled

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having read some years previously Hans Selye's book *The Stress of Life*. Selye had detailed the detrimental effects of negative emotions on body chemistry and physical health. For Cousins this gave rise to the question: If negative emotions produce negative chemical changes in the body, wouldn't the positive emotions produce positive chemical changes? "Is it possible," he asked, "that love, hope, faith, laughter, confidence and the will to live have therapeutic value? Do chemical changes occur only in the downside?"⁵⁶

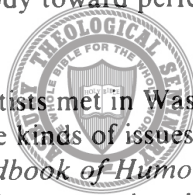
Cousins made a radical decision to drop all the medications he was taking, to replace them with large doses of vitamin C to stimulate the bodily mechanisms which combat infection, and to mobilize the positive emotions as a factor in enhancing body chemistry. He moved into a hotel room where he spent long hours watching and laughing at "Candid Camera" and Marx Brothers films. He discovered immediately that hearty laughter was effective in reducing pain. After eight days the infection in his body had largely subsided and he was beginning to move his fingers without pain. After a few months he returned to his work as editor of *Saturday Review*, and in the subsequent years he achieved full mobility.

Cousins does not claim that such a program will cure all illness, but I think that his central point has been made, i.e., that the positive emotions, especially laughter, have an important role in promoting good physical and emotional health. Two of his comments are especially significant:

I was greatly elated by the discovery that there is a physiologic basis for the ancient theory that laughter is good medicine.⁵⁷

The life force may be the least understood force on earth. William James said that human beings tend to live too far within self-imposed limits. It is possible that those limits will recede when we respect more fully the natural drive of the human mind and body toward perfectibility and regeneration.⁵⁸

A symposium of scientists met in Washington during September of this year to discuss the kinds of issues which Cousins has raised. They will publish a *Handbook of Humor Research* in 1983. Papers read at the symposium document the physical, emotional, mental,



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intrapersonal and interpersonal values of humor in human life.⁵⁹

It is becoming increasingly apparent that humor is one of the important ways we have of organizing the energies of human experience. It is one of our transformational systems for ordering our psychic and emotional responses in a controlled manner and a means of releasing subjective energies harmlessly. When it is diminished, then one of our other transformational systems must compensate for it. When it becomes incapacitated, we develop short circuits, resulting in increased stress and eventual illness in the body, the emotions, or the mind.

Thesis Four: Humor Is Appropriate to the Finitude of Our Human Situation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer stressed the importance of distinguishing between the ultimate and the penultimate, the final and the things before the final. "Only God is ultimately to be taken seriously. Everything human remains less than serious by comparison."⁶⁰ A sense of humor is needed to help us keep things in proper perspective. It constantly reminds us of the penultimate character of our present existence by exposing everything which claims to have ultimate significance.

This is particularly true with regard to ourselves. "The one offense, therefore, which comedy cannot endure," according to William F. Lynch, "is that a man should forget he is a man."⁶¹ Laughter is thus appropriate to Christian humility; by it we remind ourselves of our finitude. It saves us from pretentiousness and pomposity. For Reinhold Niebuhr, this ability to consider ourselves with amusement points to our capacity for self-transcendence.

People with a sense of humor do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to "stand off" from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. . . . This pretension is ludicrous; and its absurdity increases with our lack of awareness of it. The less we are able to laugh at ourselves, the more it becomes necessary and inevitable that others laugh at us.⁶²

Browne Barr makes the same point, only more humorously, when he says that "A person who can look at his or her own feet without laughing is spiritually deficient. A good long look at one's feet can

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bring the kind of smile that provides perspective on the whole human condition.”⁶³

Contrary to what ought to be the case, religion is sometimes used as an instrument of human pretentiousness. Paul was dealing with a group of people at Corinth already in the first century who thought that they transcended ordinary humanity in their religious experience.⁶⁴ When the call to faith is perceived to be a call to become more than human, a pretentious, doctrinaire, judgmental and deadly serious person is often the result, one who “talks down” to his Christian peers and to the imperfect world from his lofty vantage point.

The theological right has no corner on this personality style. It is equally apparent among those who have embraced the various social causes in our own time. Fundamentalism is a mindset before it is ever a theoretical viewpoint. The fundamentalist mind rarely changes; it only trades causes. Thus Peter Berger has observed that “the revolutionary is almost always a thoroughly humorless type. . . . Revolution is an earnest undertaking. The revolutionary takes it and himself too with very great seriousness. There is little room for any comic perspective.”⁶⁵ Barr speaks to the same phenomenon as he experienced it as a pastor in an urban area.

I wonder about cities like the one I know best — Berkeley, California. It is full of social idealism. Its seminaries, its university, its churches, its voting population, all take very seriously every cause for human justice. . . . Justice and mercy, yes, but a humble walk with God? I wonder, for in this city and amid its many causes I feel a grim pretentiousness, with humor often being only of a harsh, sick, perverted sort. . . . There is much too much social righteousness or much too much personal piety when there is no time to feel afresh the incongruities of our pretensions in both righteousness and piety and to laugh together about them.⁶⁶

Liberation comes only when we perceive the call to faith to be a call to become fully human, not to transcend our humanity. Our humanity is precisely what we have lost in sin. Sin is wrong, not because there is a capricious God in heaven who must have his way, but because sin is the great destroyer of the human creation. It dehumanizes us by dragging us down beneath our humanity to levels

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of bestial impulse, interpersonal exploitation and social chaos. In salvation, God not only restores our relationship to Him, but He also gives us back our humanity. We are freed in order to discover all that it means to be human before God and to achieve our fulfillment and destiny, which is synonymous with the will of God for us.

A part of being fully human means that I accept my own finitude, my limitations, my creatureliness, and that I retain a realistic perspective about it all. In that context, humor may be an expression of confession, of humanity and of submission. It frees us from the “tension of pretensions” as William Mullen has put it.⁶⁷ Alan Watts speaks in the same vein when he says that, “humor is nothing other than perfect self-awareness. It is the delighted recognition of one’s own absurdity, and a loving cynicism with respect to one’s own pretension.”⁶⁸

In terms of his impact, Karl Barth may well have been the most significant theologian in the twentieth century. Readers of his twelve volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* note that he gave only one page to the subject of humor. But in his book *Antwort*, he has a passage which perfectly expresses the humility that humor brings.

The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about God in a book of Dogmatics. They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each is thicker than the previous one. As they laugh, they say to one another, “Look! Here he comes now with his little pushcart full of volumes of the Dogmatics!” And they laugh about the men who write so much about Karl Barth instead of writing about the things he is trying to write about. Truly, the angels laugh.⁶⁹

Thesis Five: Humor Permits Us to Transcend the Irrational and Tragic Experiences in Life.

Humor not only provides us with the capacity for self-transcendence; it also permits us to rise above the ambiguities, the incongruities, the absurdities, the irrationalities and the tragedies of our existence. Peter Berger has pointed to humor as one of five “signals of transcendence” in human life, by which he means “phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our ‘natural’ reality but that appear to point beyond that reality.”⁷⁰ Humor is first of all a reflection of the imprisonment of the human spirit in the

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world. But it also recognizes the comic discrepancy in the human condition and relativizes it. "By laughing at the imprisonment of the human spirit, humor implies that this imprisonment is not final but will be overcome. . . ."⁷¹ McCord shares the same point of view regarding humor: "It is an affirmation of freedom, a claim to transcendence, an indication that no situation or system is able ultimately to contain the human spirit."⁷²

Humor is a mechanism of disengagement and a means of objectifying painful life situations. It is more than merely gaiety; it may also become a means of struggling against hopelessness and despair.⁷³ As such, it is a corrective to the tragic view of life. Kierkegaard indicated that while both the tragic and the comic interpretations focus on the contradictions of existence, the tragic viewpoint despairs of any way out of the contradiction while the comic viewpoint finds a way out by transcending the contradiction. In this way, it escapes from despair.⁷⁴ Or, as Conrad Hyers has more recently stated the relationship:

Tragedy, as with any serious modality, needs comedy to preserve equilibrium and perspective; comedy humanizes tragedy in the same way that it humanizes the sacred. The dismal and fated conclusion of the tragic flaw or circumstance is partially overcome in comic flourish. This is the prophetic side. . . . The fate that cannot be transcended, or the arbitrary will of the gods which cannot be overturned, is transcended and overturned in an heroic gesture of the human spirit. Incongruous though it may seem, man has the last laugh.⁷⁵

The most obvious example here is Jewish and Black humor. Both groups have suffered through some of the darkest times in modern Western history. It is thus no accident that Jewish and Negro comedians represent the highest percentage of people in that vocation, in proportion to their numbers in the general population.⁷⁶ Israel Knox has traced the roots of Jewish humor to a point much earlier than the modern tragedies which the Jewish people have experienced. According to him, it originated in the prophetic irony which opposed the idolatry, the lasciviousness, the oppression practiced by the nations in the ancient world, often at the expense of the Jews. This gave rise to a conviction that what "is" is not what

“ought to be” and to an optimism which transcended present tragedies in the hope of what was “yet to be.”⁷⁷ The sense of irony and humor in the face of tragedy, inherited from the Old Testament prophets, has been a reservoir of strength for their spiritual descendents numerous times during their history. As recently as the Holocaust, Victor Frankel spoke of his suffering in a Nazi concentration camp: “Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything in the human makeup, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds.”⁷⁸ Wilbur Mullen adds, “The temptation is always to see in the immediate experience of evil some sort of permanency, but laughter is the passing of judgment on all false permanencies. In this the comic sense is truly redemptive.”⁷⁹

Humor is thus not limited to the trivial and the superficial. It may also be an assertion of the undaunted human spirit in the face of the otherwise crushing tragedies of life. It refuses to be vanquished or to allow fate to have the last word. This refusal to surrender to the omnipotence of fate is the basic distinction between the comic and the tragic outlooks. In Ice’s view,

Humor expresses a dimension of consciousness that gives richness, value, and dignity to human life despite the inescapable bonds of human fate. It enables one to bear up under intolerable circumstances that otherwise would consume one. It moves through and experiences the ambiguities and paradoxes of life with its pains, losses, and sorrows, and yet ends on the side of affirmation. . . . He who can bear meaninglessness and express it with humor shows he experiences meaning within the desert of his meaninglessness, and triumphs.⁸⁰

We noted earlier that when it points to human finitude, humor may express the Christian virtues of humility and confession. When however it is a manifestation of the human spirit’s transcendence over the incongruities of existence, humor aligns itself with the Christian virtues of faith and joy. Kierkegaard distinguished two kinds of humor. The first kind was sub-ethical and avoided all moral demands. The second kind of humor is the opposite of the tragic outlook and opens toward the religious understanding of existence

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which is perceived by faith, but faith itself lies beyond it.⁸¹ It was from this perspective that Christopher Fry would later say that “comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith.”⁸²

Reinhold Niebuhr spoke of humor and faith in this same kind of sequential relationship. “Humor is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer.”⁸³ Both humor and faith, he said, deal with the incongruities of our existence, but humor is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life while faith is concerned with ultimate incongruities.⁸⁴ Robert McAfee Brown clarifies this distinction:

Humor helps us to see how incongruous it is that we finite creatures make infinite claims about ourselves; faith helps us see how incongruous it is that infinite claims should be made in our behalf by Another. And yet, the fact that they are made anyhow, and that they finally define who we are, blesses the incongruity. That we should be loved by One greater than we are is the ultimate incongruity. To believe it is to be able to indulge in laughter — not the laughter of nervousness or the laughter of being unmasked, but the laughter of pure joy that, despite everything, it should be so.⁸⁵

As such, according to Niebuhr, humor is a “no-man’s” land between faith and despair. In itself, humor can point either to faith or meaninglessness; it can stand in the service of cynicism or of hope.⁸⁶ But it is only when humor aligns with faith that it comes to have redemptive potential. Peter Berger says in this connection,

From the Christian point of view one can say that comedy, unlike tragedy, bears within it a great secret. This secret is the promise of redemption. For redemption promises in eternity what comedy gives us in its few moments of precarious liberation — the collapse of our imprisonment.⁸⁷

Wilbur Mullen adds, “The comic sense as a posture or stance or attitude is a genuine means of grace. Its redemptive power saves me from the feelings of bondage to the finitude of present structures and awakens in me gentle anticipations of actual deliverance from the

incongruities of finitude.”⁸⁸

When humor is joined to faith, it may also be one of the expressions of Christian joy, pointing to the ultimate eschatological joy. This is not to say that humor is displaced by joy or that no humor is legitimate for faith except that which corresponds to Christian joy. “To be caught up in the exultation surrounding the sacred, and in the confidence of assurance of faith, is not to annul humor but to give it its proper basis. Joy does not exclude humor any more than holiness excludes laughter.”⁸⁹ But, on the other hand, humor may be more than the passive resignation of the hedonist and the nihilist to the joke of meaninglessness. It may also be more than the comic side of our finitude and our response to the incongruities and tragedies of life. When joined to faith, it may participate in the joy of the world to come which has been disclosed in the present in an anticipatory manner as a result of the Christ event.⁹⁰ Hyers describes this dimension of humor:

As that which is grounded in the sacred, humor is also the laughter within the joy of faith. It is not the hollow laughter of cynicism and despair, but the gay laughter of belief in an ultimate ground and resolution of meaning, purpose and value in life. This is not a humor within the anxiety of faith, but along side the anxiety within faith. It is therefore the lightheartedness that accompanies hope and assurance, the carefree laughter granted by the freedom of faith.⁹¹

Conclusion

The theologians differ among themselves when answering the question whether there will be humor in heaven. In the dichotomy which Niebuhr posed between humor and faith, he concluded that “laughter must be heard in the outer courts of religion; and the echoes of it should resound in the sanctuary; but there is no laughter in the holy of holies. There laughter is swallowed up in the prayer and humor is fulfilled by faith.”⁹² For Niebuhr, humor belongs only to this world with its incongruities. But Chad Walsh wonders whether Niebuhr, as a neo-orthodox theologian, may have been overwhelmed with the sense of the transcendence of God, resulting in a profound misunderstanding of the human stance before God.⁹³ Peter Berger half-humorously suggests that,

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It would not be surprising if, to the blessed, redemption appears after the terrors of the world as a form of comic relief. But there can be no doubt about one thing. There will be no tragedy in heaven — by definition, as it were. But man will remain funny forever. If nothing else, there will be material for endless comedies in his relations with the angels! The tragic thus shows us man in time, but the comic may well give us an intimation of what man is and always will be, even in eternity.⁹⁴

Certainly, much of that which is the cause of humor in us now will be absent in heaven, such as sinful human pretensions (Rev. 21:8,27). The cause of human suffering will have passed away (Rev. 7:13-17; 21:4). They will be transcended in fact and forever rather than by faith and humor for the moment. We will still be creatures, but our finitude will have a clearer vision of the Infinite. Ambiguity will then be replaced by clarity, incongruity by perfection, tragedy by triumph, hope by reality, and laughter will become synonymous with eternal joy. The character of any additional humor will have to await disclosure on that day.

In the meantime, may we hear the words of our Lord who said, "Do not look dismal" (Matt. 6:16, *Oxford Annotated Bible*).

Footnotes

¹*Newsweek*, October 4, 1982, p. 74; cf. also Maria Harris, "Religious Educators and the Comic Vision," *Religious Education* 75 (1980), p. 427.

²*E.B. and Katherine S. White, eds., A Subtreasury of American Humor* (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1945), p. xvii.

³Quoted by Jackson Lee Ice, "Notes Toward a Theology of Humor," *Religion and Life* 42 (1973), p. 389.

⁴D.H. Munro, *Argument of Laughter* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), p.13.

⁵Lucien Price, ed., *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), p.199.

⁶Max Eastman, *The Sense of Humor* (New York: Scribner's, 1921), p. 86.

⁷John Dominic Crossan, *Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 11-16.

⁸Kierkegaard considered the relationship between humor and religion in several of his writings. See especially his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941) where the theme appears numerous times.

⁹Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," *Macmillan's Magazine*, March, 1860.

¹⁰Sigmund Freud, "Wit and Its Relations to the Unconscious," in A.A. Brill, ed.,

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The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud (New York: Modern Library Inc., 1938), pp.663-803.

¹¹Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in Wylie Sypher, ed., *Comedy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), pp. 61-190.

¹²M. Conrad Hyers, ed., *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 4.

¹³Graeme Garrett, "My Brother Esau Is an Hairy Man: An Encounter Between the Comedian and the Preacher," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980), p. 240.

¹⁴This attitude is not limited to Christianity. The Buddhist scholastics distinguished six degrees of laughter, of which the Buddha himself was said to be "guilty" of indulging only in the first, i.e., a faint smile which did not expose the teeth. No Buddhist should go beyond that if he wishes to reflect the example of the founder. Shwe Zan Aung, *The Compendium of Philosophy*, a translation of the Abhidhammattha-Sangaha (London: Luzac and Co., 1910), pp. 22-25; reported in Hyers, *op cit.*, p. 2, n. 1.

¹⁵Sten Stenson, *Sense and Nonsense in Religion* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 104.

¹⁶Jackson Lee Ice, "Notes Toward a Theology of Humor," *Religion and Life* 42 (1973), p. 390.

¹⁷David A. Redding, "God Made Me to Laugh," *Christianity Today* 6 (June 6, 1962), p.3.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Paul K. Jewett, "The Wit and Humor of Life," *Christianity Today* 3 (June 3, 1959), p. 7.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹The text of Proposition XV is included in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, pp. 252-261.

²²Ibid.

²³*The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), XIII, p. 285.

²⁴Moses M. Henkle, *Primary Platform of Methodism, Or Exposition of the General Rules* (Louisville: The Southern Methodist Book Concern, 1851), pp. 173-199.

²⁵J. T. Crane, *Popular Amusements* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1869), pp. 77-88, 112-115.

²⁶We should more properly speak of a tradition which began with Puritanism, but which was later reinforced by Pietism.

²⁷Eugene J. Fisher, "The Divine Comedy: Humor in the Bible," *Religious Education* 72 (1977), p. 572.

²⁸James I. McCord, "On Getting and Keeping a Sense of Humor," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 67 (1975), p. 48.

²⁹Wilbur Mullen, "Toward a Theology of Humor," *Christian Scholar's Review* 3 (1973), pp. 4, 12. Mullen, a Nazarene, is the only representative from the holiness tradition in Wesleyan theology that I could find in a ten-year search of the literature, who has addressed the subject of humor theologically.

³⁰Ice, "Notes Toward a Theology of Humor," p. 390.

³¹The quotations are given by Hugo Rahner in his essay titled, "Eutrapelia: A Forgotten Virtue," in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, pp.191f.

³²I am indebted to Wilbur Mullen's article, "Toward a Theology of Humor," p. 4, for these references to St. Benedict and Peter Damiani.

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³³Rahner, "Eutrapelia," pp. 185-197.

³⁴Page 3 above.

³⁵Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, pp. 228f.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 20-27.

³⁷Cf. Kenneth Hamilton, "Laughter and Vision," *Soundings* 55 (1972), pp. 170-172; William Hamilton, "Humor, Plausible and Demonic," *Christian Century* 76 (1959), p. 807; Paul K. Jewett, "Wit and Humor of Life," pp. 8f.

³⁸Mullen, "Toward a Theology of Humor," p. 12.

³⁹The Hebrew may refer either to the sea monster playing or God playing with the sea creature. The rabbis favored the latter interpretation; cf. Marcian Strange, "God and Laughter," *Worship* 45 (1971), p. 9.

⁴⁰Georg Bertram, "Piadzo," Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), V, p. 629.

⁴¹Strange, "God and Laughter," p. 8.

⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 10ff.

⁴³Paul's reference to the "foolishness of God" (I Cor. 1:25), is meant more to deprecate human wisdom than to speak of any divine characteristic.

⁴⁴G.K. Chesterson, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1927), p. 299.

⁴⁵Elton Trueblood, "The Humor of Christ," in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, p. 166.

⁴⁶*Ibid.* The remainder of Trueblood's essay considers episodes in Jesus' ministry in which he made use of various forms of humor.

⁴⁷Jerry H. Gill, "Jesus, Irony, and the 'New Quest'," *Encounter* 41 (1950), p. 139. This thesis is developed in the remainder of the essay.

⁴⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, "Humor and Faith," in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, p. 134.

⁴⁹Ice, "Notes Toward a Theology of Humor," pp. 390ff.; cf. Mullen, "Toward a Theology of Humor." p. 12.

⁵⁰Theodore Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Newton, Mass.: C. T. Branford, 1970), p. 281.

⁵¹Numerous essays have treated these forms of humor in the Old and New Testaments. In addition to the essays by Elton Trueblood, Jerry Gill, Eugene Fisher and Marcian Strange mentioned earlier, see Francis Rossow, "Dramatic Irony in the Bible," *Concordia Journal* 8 (1982), pp. 48-52; G.W. Parsons, "Literary Features of the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981), 213-229; John C. Holbert, "Satire in the Speech of Zophar (Job 20)," *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981), 171-179; Israel Knox, "The Traditional Roots of Jewish Humor," *Judaism* 12 (1963), 327-337; John C. Holbert, "Satire in the Book of Jonah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21 (1981), pp. 59-81; Harry Boonstra, "Satire in Matthew," *Christian Literature* 29 (1980), pp. 32-45; A. B. Spencer, "The Wise Fool; Irony in Paul," *Novum Testamentum* 23 (1981), pp. 349-360.

⁵²Fisher, "The Divine Comedy," pp. 571ff.

⁵³Graeme Garrett, "'My Brother Esau is an Hairy Man'" p. 239 and n. 1; Chad Walsh, "On Being With It: An Afterword," in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, p. 244.

⁵⁴Ice, "Notes Toward a Theology of Humor," p. 392.

⁵⁵Reported by Ice, "Notes Toward a Theology of Humor," pp. 395, 400, ns. 6 and 7.

⁵⁶Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979), pp. 34f.

⁵⁷Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness*, p. 40.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 48.

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- ⁵⁹*Newsweek*, Oct. 4, 1982, p. 74.
- ⁶⁰Peter Berger, "Christian Faith and the Social Comedy," in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, p. 129.
- ⁶¹William F. Lynch, "The Humanity of Comedy," in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, p. 29.
- ⁶²Reinhold Niebuhr, "Humor and Faith," pp. 140f.
- ⁶³Browne Barr, "The Bishop and the Banana Peel: An Inquiry into the Question: Where Has all the Humor Gone?," *Christian Century* 93 (July 21, 1976), p. 662.
- ⁶⁴Cf. my essay, "Male Headship in Paul's Thought," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 15 (1980), pp. 49f. and p. 63, ns. 14-19 for bibliography.
- ⁶⁵Peter Berger, "Christian Faith and Social Comedy," p. 129.
- ⁶⁶Browne Barr, "The Bishop and the Banana Peel," p. 662.
- ⁶⁷Wilbur Mullen, "Toward a Theology of Humor," p. 7.
- ⁶⁸Alan Watts, *Beyond Theology: The Art of Godmanship* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), p. 97.
- ⁶⁹Karl Barth, *Antwort: Karl Barth zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, p. 895; the English translation of the paragraph is by R.M. Brown in his *Pseudonyms of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 23.
- ⁷⁰Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1969), pp. 65f., 86-90.
- ⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 88.
- ⁷²James I. McCord, "On Getting and Keeping a Sense of Humor," p. 48.
- ⁷³Conrad Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," *Cross Currents* 19 (1969), pp. 74, 76.
- ⁷⁴Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 463ff.
- ⁷⁵Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, p. 232.
- ⁷⁶*Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷Israel Knox, "The Traditional Roots of Jewish Humor," *Judaism* 12 (1963), pp. 327-337.
- ⁷⁸Victor Frankel, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), p. 68.
- ⁷⁹Wilbur Mullen, "Toward a Theology of Humor," p. 68.
- ⁸⁰Jackson Lee Ice, "Notes Toward a Theology of Humor," p. 398.
- ⁸¹Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 464-468. cf. *Kenneth Hamilton, "Laughter and Vision," pp. 168f., 175f.*
- ⁸²Christopher Fry, "Comedy," *Tulane Drama Review* 4 (March, 1960), p. 77.
- ⁸³Reinhold Niebuhr, "Humor and Faith," pp. 134f.
- ⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 135.
- ⁸⁵R.M. Brown, "The Spirit's Eighth Gift," *Christianity and Crisis* 40 (Feb. 4, 1980), p. 9.
- ⁸⁶Niebuhr, "Humor and Faith," p. 137.
- ⁸⁷Peter Berger, "Christian Faith and the Social Comedy," p. 128.
- ⁸⁸Wilbur Mullen, "Toward a Theology of Humor," p. 10.
- ⁸⁹Conrad Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," p. 79.
- ⁹⁰Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), I, pp. 339f.; II, pp. 83f.
- ⁹¹M. Conrad Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," p. 78.
- ⁹²Reinhold Niebuhr, "Humor and Faith," p. 135.

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⁹³Chad Walsh, "On Being With It: An Afterword," on Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, pp. 242ff.

⁹⁴Peter Berger, "Christian Faith and Social Comedy," p. 128.

