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Ironic Faith in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*

Abstract

Monty Python's *Life of Brian* tells the story of Brian, a contemporary of Jesus whose life becomes chaotic when he is mistaken for a messiah. Standard comedic devices are used to mock and ridicule those who use their authority or office to claim that they are more than human. In this case, laughter humbles those individuals and brings them back to the human community. Second, an ironic faith perspective allows the Pythons to assert that it is up to each individual to define the meaning of his/her own life. While some interpretations of ironic faith suggest the possibility of an ethical response to the perception of the gap between what is and what ought to be, the vision of the absurd in *Life of Brian* is focused more on the individual than on the community. The end result of an ironic faith is not a call to change the world but inclusion in a community of people who share the same ironic vision.

Keywords

comedy, Monty Python, absurdism, existentialism, religion

Author Notes

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It's a good joke. We're not putting down anyone's religion but the ways of following religion that completely miss the point of what it's all about. --John Cleese¹

Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, set during the life of Jesus, tells the story of Brian, an average guy who just wants to live a quiet life. Through his involvement with a revolutionary political group that is trying to overthrow the Romans, Brian is mistaken for the messiah, arrested, and sentenced to death by crucifixion. The final scenes of the movie show Brian being venerated by his political comrades, The People's Front of Judaea, and castigated by his mother for abandoning her. The movie concludes with Brian being encouraged to adopt a more positive outlook on life, which he does. Brian is encouraged to "always look on the bright side of life." The film ends with a wide shot of the mountain where Brian and others are being crucified and singing about the choice that every person has to choose the meaning and value of their existence. *Life of Brian* was a modest hit when it was released but is now considered a comedy classic.

Given the thematic elements of the film and the way that many of the events of Brian's life parallel the life of Jesus, the release of the film was met with protest and criticism for what some perceived was an attack on religion.² The members of Monty Python make clear that Brian is not Jesus. The film opens with three wise men presenting gifts to a newborn infant. When they realize they have the wrong infant—Brian, not Jesus—they take back their gifts and rush to a manger lit with beatific light. In the following scene Jesus is shown delivering the Sermon on the Mount while Brian watches from the edge of the crowd. Members of Monty Python claim that the film is not an attack on religion per-se, but ridicules blind and uncritical acceptance of any ideology or belief system, including religion. The Christian messiah or message is not satirized

in the film. What is satirized is how people interpret and respond to Jesus and his message.³ Members of Monty Python make clear that neither Jesus as an historical figure nor a religious teacher is the subject of ridicule.⁴ Each of the surviving members of Monty Python has gone to great lengths to eliminate any notion that the film is anti-Jesus or anti-Christian. For Eric Idle, Jesus is not made fun of in the film because “it became clear early on that we couldn’t make fun of the Christ since what he says is very fine (and Buddhist).”⁵ Palin adds:

So our target, what made the film valid, was not, ‘Jesus didn’t exist’ or ‘Jesus was a fraud’ or that ‘Jesus was wrong,’ but that we rely on interpretation and that interpretation is a *political* thing, and it’s been used by people throughout the ages to condone all sorts of excesses. And yet these are just people who will take this story, the story of this man, and use it in any way that they want—usually to extract money from the poor, gullible people and all that. That’s exactly something we could say.⁶

Their comments reveal that members of Monty Python had a point to make and targets at which they were taking aim. However, they made the film within the context of faith, not outside of faith, and by their own words were not trying to persuade people to abandon their religious beliefs. Terry Jones has the most often repeated statement about *Life of Brian* as an example of heresy, not blasphemy:

Well, it’s not blasphemous because it accepts the Christian story; in fact, the film doesn’t make sense unless you take the Christian story, but it’s heretical in terms of [being] very critical of the Church, and I think the joke of it is, really: to say, here is Christ saying all these wonderful things about people living together in peace and love, and then for the next two thousand years people are putting each other to death in His name because they can’t agree about *how* He said it, or in what order He said it. The whole thing about the ‘The sandal!’ ‘It’s a *shoe!*’ is like a history of the Church in three minutes. (emphasis in original)⁷

John Cleese disagrees with Jones, but disagrees in the direction of faith:

Terry always says it’s a heresy, and I’ve never understood this because a heresy is a teaching which is at variance with the Church’s teaching, and I don’t know in what way we’re a heresy. What we are is quite clearly making fun of the way people follow religion but not of religion itself, and the whole purpose of having that lovely scene at the start when the Three Wise Men go into the wrong stable is

to say Brian is not the Christ, he just gets taken for a Messiah. And that's a very important point.⁸

The idea that the satire in *Life of Brian* could be used to deepen religious belief is related by Palin who said that clergy came up to him and endorsed the film and that one church member gave the film a positive review after his congregation held a screening and group discussion.⁹

To take the members of Monty Python at their word is to see *Life of Brian* as a film about the freedom one has to assign meaning to one's life. Cleese sums up this approach to the film best in his exasperated, but amused, summation of the film's initial reception. Cleese said that the irony of the film's reception was criticism and protest of the film ended up making the same point they were trying to make (and making them a lot more money): "One of the themes in the film is, 'Do make up your own mind about things and don't do what people tell you.' And I find it slightly funny that there are organizations saying, 'Do not go and see this film that tells you *not* to do what you are told.'"¹⁰ Integral to thinking for oneself and not doing what one is told is an ironic perspective on reality that allows one to see through pretense and illusion in order to realize a more complete, truthful or validating understanding of reality. Not just irony, but sarcasm, parody, satire, and other comedic devices become ways that individuals can assert the meaning of their own existence over and against the efforts of others who would seek to determine the meaning of life or what it means to be human for them.

One of the most important elements of any belief system is the definition of what it means to be human. Definitions of what it means to be human would include the relationship between human and divine, how humans ought to relate to one another, the explanation for whatever limitations come with being human, and whatever meaning ought to be associated with life. *Life of Brian* addresses all of these, but does so indirectly. The Monty Python troop use

parody, satire and irony to show that the meaning of life is defining the meaning of life for oneself. More than that, they encourage the use of these comedic devices so that one can see that happiness and positive thinking are choices that people can make for themselves. Comedy, specifically an ironic vision, is how individuals can see through beliefs and ideologies that claim more and less for humans than what is the case. First, I will argue that in order to make the point that each individual chooses the meaning for his or her own life, the Monty Python troop use standard comedic devices, such as parody and satire, to reveal the lack of thought and reflective thinking that define religious beliefs. In *Life of Brian*, they use humor to show that any effort to place oneself outside or above the human community is futile and laughable. Essentially, the members of Monty Python mock people, institutions and ideas for ignoring the limitations that all humans must face. Characters are mocked when they use their office or title to place themselves above the human community or when they use their office or title as an excuse to obscure the flaws and vulnerabilities that make them human. Any definition of what it means to be human must be bounded by the limitations created by being human—which for members of Monty Python means that we are finite, fallible and often overwhelmed by a world that is larger and more complex than us.

Second, though his/her ironic redefinition of what it means to be human is liberating, it is not socially liberating. While some understandings of religion and comedy suggest that there is an ethical moment that could lead to the fulfillment of prophetic promises of justice and liberation for all, that vision is only transformative at the individual, not societal, level. The humor in *Life of Brian* is an occasion to see the world a different way but it does not go as far as calling for individuals and communities to make the world a better place. Instead, the focus is squarely on the individual and the individual's freedom to define the meaning of their life as he

or she sees fit. I argue that defining the meaning of one's life occurs within the context of an ironic vision that defines the challenge of being human as the realization of the limitations that come with being human. Here, being human is the ironic realization that one ought to assume responsibility for what is within human control and not behaving as someone outside or above the human community.

First, in asserting that each person is responsible for defining the meaning of his/her own life it is necessary to reduce in authority and esteem those individuals or institutions who have gone too far in asserting for others what it means to be human. Here, humor is used to humanize those who have placed themselves above or outside the human community. Henri Bergson in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, argues that humor ought to be used to return to the human community those whose mechanistic and routinized behavior represses the vitality that defines what it means to be human. Rigidity of behavior or mind causes people to lose focus and become out of touch with themselves or society.¹¹ Bergson contrasts “the rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical” with “the supple, the ever-changing and the living” and claims that laughter directed at such behavior calls attention to that behavior so that it can be corrected.¹² Laughter of this sort is cruel; it leaves a painful impression on the individual or group that is ridiculed by pointing out their separation from society and motivating them to come back to the social. No longer oblivious to the routinized and lifeless behavior that separates the individual or group from the rest of society they return to the fold chastened, but ready to contribute to the good of that society. Bergson concludes that “it is the business of laughter to repress any separatist tendency. Its function is to convert rigidity into plasticity, to readapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the corners where they are met with.”¹³ What society wants, then, is for individuals to live, and to live well by demonstrating an elasticity of mind.¹⁴ The

goal of laughter, as Bergson sees it, is Utilitarian. The harm of being humiliated is outweighed by the good of being social, the good of social unity, and the progress that can only be made when society functions as a unit. Religious humor also humanizes those whose behavior has distanced or removed them from the human community. However, the behavior that is ridiculed is the opposite of that identified by Bergson. The target of religious humor displays attitudes or behaviors that place them above the human and closer to the divine and that need to be brought back down to earth. Having claimed for themselves more than any human has a right to possess or claim, characters are returned to the human community by being reminded of their finitude, mortality and limited perspective – the very things that separate the human from the divine.

The comedy of the Hebrew Bible is Bergsonian in that it is a mocking laughter that seeks to reintegrate into the human community those who think themselves more than human. But it is a religious laughter aimed at those who aspire to be divine. In *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, William Whedbee analyzes stories from Genesis, Exodus and the Book of Jonah to show that laughter was one tool for maintaining the gap between the human and the divine. Similar to Bergson, Whedbee sees laughter as restorative: comedic devices such as irony, parody and satire are used to bring low Israel's enemies, act as a form of punishment for the boastful and proud and criticize unethical or inappropriate behavior. Those who had set themselves above or apart from the community are brought back to the fold, though in the process they are chastened and humbled. His conclusion is that the comedy of the Bible "takes dead aim at a tyrannical and oppressive society and attempts to subvert it in order to institute a new society built upon traditions that foster liberation and life."¹⁵ The humor in *Life of Brian* takes its cue from the humor in the Hebrew Bible: laughter is aimed at those who use their office or authority to get closer to the divine than they deserve or is possible. Laughter brings them back down to the

human community and reintegrates them into society. Their words are relativized and those who had been under their power or sway are liberated and able to define the meaning of their life for themselves. In *Life of Brian*, liberation and life go hand in hand. To be liberated is to gain the opportunity to define the meaning of one's life.

The humor in *Life of Brian* can be seen as moving in the direction from bondage—bondage to an idea, practice, attitude or belief—to liberation, where liberation is an opportunity to define for oneself what it means to be human. Stephen Erickson links incongruity and liberation:

The Pythons offer zany and irreverent comedy that can liberate us. We can distinguish the joyful laughter that comes over us when we feel happy from the laughter that arises from the often sudden and intense recognition of incongruity, the flash of awareness that 'things don't add up.' This is especially the case when words and actions move in different directions. In the space this opens up, a Pythonesque space, a newfound freedom becomes available.¹⁶

Though many scenes and many characters in the movie are examples of this movement, one that stands out is the stoning scene. John Cleese portrays a Jewish leader presiding over the stoning of an old and feeble man named Matthias. Matthias is accused of blasphemy and defends himself by saying that he had remarked to his wife that "that piece of halibut was good enough for Jehovah." Uttering the name of God enrages Cleese who accuses Matthias of blaspheming again. One member of the mob hits Matthias in the head with a stone before she/he is given the signal to begin the stoning.¹⁷ She/he defends her/his action by saying that Matthias blasphemed when he said Jehovah; she/he is then stoned by the mob for blasphemy. In an effort to restore order to the mob, Cleese admonishes the crowd that no stones are to be thrown until he says so even if someone says the name "Jehovah." The eager crowd then pelts him with stones for his blasphemy. The last we see of Cleese as the Jewish leader is his arms and legs protruding from underneath a larger boulder that had been dropped on him by several members of the mob;

Matthias scampers away. Like too many religious leaders, Cleese's Jewish leader thinks himself exempt from the rules. The simple irony is that any utterance of the name Jehovah is blasphemy, even if one thinks oneself exempt from that prohibition. The more complex irony is that no one is authorized to say the name of Jehovah, therefore, no one person nor one office or circumstance elevates someone above anyone else.

Though some would see the mocking of a religious figure as an attack on religion in general, something more sophisticated is going on in this scene. In *Life of Brian* members of Monty Python display what Jerome Miller would call 'satiric irreverence'—"a hermeneutic of suspicion for the purpose of exposing the incongruity between sacred order and those who purport to represent it."¹⁸ Cleese's Jewish leader behaves as if the law he is representing and enforcing does not apply to him. He cannot see that there is very little difference between his and Matthias' saying the name Jehovah. More than that, Cleese's character cannot see that there is no difference between him and Matthias as human beings. Being equal, the law applies to them equally. The humor in *Life of Brian* is often at the expense of these characters (for example, the speech impaired Pontius Pilate and the lisping Biggus Dickus) who think that their office exempts them from human failings and limitations. The movie celebrates the frailty and fragility of life—what Miller terms 'reverencing impotence'—by acknowledging how difficult life is, and how meaning can be found in spite of the limitations that come from being human. By this term Miller means the valorization of human failings and folly in the face of those who would claim that they are free from the human condition. Laughing reverently carries religious overtones because one is chipping away at the foolish to get closer to the sacred.

Returning to the charge of nihilism in *Life of Brian*, if the Monty Python troop were using humor to show that religious beliefs and practices were foolish and meaningless, then they would

be guilty as charged. In any number of scenes they show people missing the point of religion altogether. During the Sermon on the Mount scene, the people at the edge of the crowd think that Jesus blesses the cheesemakers (and worse still, they try to make sense of it and fit the blessing of the cheesemakers into a larger theological framework). Brian makes up his own apocalyptic sermon in order to avoid being arrested by the Romans; crowds of people are shown responding positively to his panicked rambling. There is no doubt that the humor in *Life of Brian* does undermine religion by making religious leaders look like pompous buffoons and religious truths the result of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. However, those who are inclined toward faith could see past these jabs and see a higher truth. Stephen Faison writes, "Using humor to illustrate how ludicrous particular beliefs appear when their consequences are acted out for our benefit, the Pythons succeed in challenging us to question certain religious assumptions. That's not to say that belief in God should be extinguished, but if our behavior looks ridiculous when played for entertainment, perhaps we should examine beliefs and practices attributed to God that seem so absurd."¹⁹ What Monty Python troop wants people to examine is the opportunity they have to decide the meaning of their life for themselves. Not defining the meaning of life for oneself leads to absurd behavior and belief. After being identified as a messiah, Brian awakes one morning to find a mass of people outside his home. The people are waiting for a message from Brian that will confirm their belief in him and validate their existence. Brian does not want this responsibility. Forced to speak to the crowd, Brian begs them to take control of their own lives: "Look, you've got it all wrong! You don't NEED to follow ME, You don't NEED to follow ANYBODY! You've got to think for your selves! You're ALL individuals!"²⁰ The joke is when one member of the crowd declares that he is not an individual. Ironically, the only true

individuals were Brian, the lone dissenter in the crowd who denied his individuality and, eventually, anyone who sees through the irony to the truth conveyed in that joke.

The first type of religious humor—humor that mocks the powerful so as to return them to the human community—sets the stage for an ironic faith that, having recognized the limits that come with being human, are an occasion to define the meaning of one’s life within the parameters of the human. Of the different approaches to ironic faith, all have in common a rejection of the status quo for something that lies beyond the appearance of this world. The understandings of ironic faith developed by Edwin Good in *Irony and the Old Testament* and Peter Berger in *Redeeming Laughter* are about transcendence. Good emphasizes the potential that ironic faith has to liberate individuals from bondage to the temporal and finite world for freedom in the infinite and eternal. Berger’s understanding of ironic faith emphasizes freedom in the absurd. The understanding of ironic faith developed by Simon Critchley in *On Laughter* is redemptive in the sense that the perception of incongruity or dissonance between what is and what could be is an ethical call to establish a more just world. The ironic faith of *Life of Brian* is closest to the ironic faith articulated by Berger in that the recognition of the absurd is the occasion for faith. However, it is an ironic faith that focuses squarely on individual meaning and transcendence and does not call for a societal transformation

Edwin Good locates the beginning of irony in the conflict between pretense and reality. The perception of irony is a criticism of undeserved pretense and of foolishness when seriousness is required. Derision is aimed at those “who think they are something when they are actually nothing.”²¹ In Good’s terms those who think more of themselves than they should are the *alazon*, the arrogant know it all who cannot see what is in front of him/her. In *Life of Brian*, the leader of the People’s Front of Judea, Reg (played by John Cleese) is an *alazon*. When

drawing up the manifesto that will guide the group's activities Reg asks what good the Romans have ever done. What follows is a long list of benefits provided by the Romans; however, Reg is still not satisfied: "But apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, viniculture, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh-water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?"²² The punch-line is an obvious criticism of revolutionary groups who let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Reg's point is that however good it is under the Romans the people are not free and sovereign. What haven't the Romans done for the people? They haven't made them free. The good that the Romans have provided is overshadowed by the perfect that Reg and the People's Front of Judea fight for. Only by perceiving the irony of the joke is the movement from what is to what should be obvious. In this scene Reg looks foolish, however, considered in the larger context of the film's message that each individual ought to be able to determine the meaning of his/her own life Reg still looks foolish, but foolish in that he is going about the right thing the wrong way.

The human dilemma, as Good understands it, is bondage to the finite and temporal masquerading as the infinite and eternal. Reg's obliviousness to all that the Romans have provided is an example of a bondage that would be escaped if he had an ironic perspective on the situation. Ironic faith is liberating because it allows the individual to see the finite and temporal for what it is, limited and temporary, and not for what it claims to be, infinite and eternal. Turned toward the self, ironic faith allows an individual to find "genuine humanity in his relationship to God" putting an end to the "frantic search for alternative sources of humanity for other fulfillment."²³ For Good, ironic faith is an ethical call to live in the truth and to live free from the bondage of untruth or deception. He writes that "liberating faith is the condition of the true irony that fears neither to perceive nor to state the ironic incongruities of which human life is so full.

And liberating faith will also aim at the amendment of those incongruities, the extension of its liberty among men, which is the fundamental aim of irony.”²⁴ If Reg were able to see the irony of his position he would work for peace by trying to bring an end to the conflict between the Romans and the various religious/political groups trying to control Judea (the Judean People’s Front, the Judean Popular People’s Front, the Campaign for a Free Galilee, and the Popular Front of Judea). In fact, the only thing these groups can agree on is that they hate the Judean People’s Front. Seeing the irony of his position, Reg’s vision for the end of the Roman occupation would be transformed into an effort to set people free from their own limited political or religious vision. The ironic vision of *Life of Brian*, while similar to Good’s in many regards, does not cohere with this last part. Much of the ironic vision of *Life of Brian* is about being released from claims that finite and temporal beliefs are meaningful because they transcend this world. However, *Life of Brian* demonstrates that the individual is responsible for giving a meaning to his/her own life, not transforming the world to cohere with that ironic vision.

Simon Critchley extends the ethical imperative of ironic faith. Similar to Good, Critchley links comedy of incongruity to religious concerns for transcendence and redemption. More than Good, Critchley opens up incongruity, faith and the absurd to being about community and sharing responsibility for the relativizing of this world in light of the promise of another world. For Critchley there is something religious, almost messianic, about laughter if that laughter starts with a shared world of beliefs and practices and subverts or frustrates the expectations arising from that shared world. The religious moment of this type of laughter emerges when laughing points to “how those practices might be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise.”²⁵ The laughter of incongruity can become ethical laughter when that laughter calls for the closing of the gap between the way the world is and the way the world ought to be. At an

individual or group level, laughter serves as a call to make the world something other and more than what it is. Stokes defines this sort of laughter as communitarian, but it is also moral: "This comedy is, in fact, a kind of spiritual comedy, one that asks for no less than a new idea of community and a new idea of one's responsibility to that community."²⁶ The form of this response is new connections between the community and those who had been excluded. Like laughter, the response is active and begins with "a profound re-seeing as one looks at the world and responds to it."²⁷ Ironic faith is, for Critchley, an occasion to change the world, not just change how one sees or relates to the world. One can imagine that at the end of this project there is no longer a need for irony because the gap between what is and what could be has been closed.

Neither Good's nor Critchley's vision of ironic faith coheres with the vision of ironic faith in *Life of Brian* because one of the problems faced by Brian is how other people make it difficult for him to define the meaning of his own life. Other people make it difficult to be who one is or wants to be because they are always looking for validation for their beliefs or agendas by agreeing with, or forcing agreement with, others. Brian reaches his breaking point in a scene where he tries to deny the fact that he is the messiah:

Brian: ...Will you please listen? I'm not the Messiah! Do you understand? Honestly!
Woman: Only the true Messiah denies his divinity!
Brian: What? Well, what sort of chance does that give me? All right, I *am* the Messiah!
Crowd: He is! He is the Messiah!
Brian: Now, *fuck off!*
[Silence]
Arthur: How shall we fuck off, oh Lord?
Brian: Oh, just go away! Leave me alone!²⁸

The truth of that joke is that in order to be an individual one has to defy everything and everyone. The freedom to determine the meaning of one's life comes from resisting or outright rejecting any person or group who pushes a philosophy of life. In *Life of Brian* other people are an

obstacle to meaning and the individual is left frustrated, trying to find a meaning for his/her own existence.

For that reason, the ironic faith of *Life of Brian* coheres with Peter Berger's more individualistic ironic faith which is based on a perception of the absurd. Similar to Good, Berger sees the laughter of ironic faith as an indication that that something is out of sync with the order of the universe. The recognition of that incongruity opens up the possibility of transcending this world for a new world.²⁹ Berger believes that an absurd perspective on reality, defined as an upside down or inverted perspective, establishes "a reality beyond the absurd realities of this life."³⁰ The absurd belief posits the existence of a reality beyond this one but admits that it is unknowable, unreachable and unrealizable. One believes, absurdly, that there is more than this world but this world is all that is possible to know. From a perspective of faith, the experience of the absurd reveals the contingent nature of this world in light of a reality that is real, eternal and reveals the challenge of making a meaningful existence out of this finite and temporal world. The point of ironic faith, then, is liberation from possibility to freedom in reality. The ironic faith that *Life of Brian* suggests is one where the viewer puts distance between herself and mainstream understandings of life, religion and the meaning of life. In doing so the viewer is able to determine the meaning of those things for him/herself. In this way cultural values are relativized, and their meaning and worth are determined by the viewer. Ironic faith liberates the audience from literalisms and leads to a deeper understanding of the meaning of life. For those who would still argue that realizing that life is finite, absurd and ultimately meaningless—except for the meaning that one gives it—is nihilistic, Randall Auxier suggests that what ironic faith liberates one from more than anything else is cheerlessness. Ironic faith, based in the perception of the gap between what is and what ought to be, avoids cheerlessness or pathos through an ironic

distancing that comes from “common sense telling us that *no one* actually has the answers to questions like ‘is there a God?’”³¹ One become free to worry about this world, this life, and free to make of this life whatever one wants. As Miller has pointed out, this rebellion against the pathos of religion locates the sacred in a celebration of human frailty and folly.

The recognition and acceptance of the absurd as an avenue to a newly meaningful existence is conveyed in the song “Always Look On the Bright Side of Life.” Brian, having been condemned to death by crucifixion, has just been repudiated by his mother, feted by the People’s Front of Judea who sang “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow,” and saluted by the Judean People’s Front Crack Suicide Squad, is—rightly so—bereft of hope. The prisoner next to him encourages him to look on the bright side of life.³² In the song, life is presented as overwhelming and the fact that everyone dies proves the futility of trying to do or to be more than human. However, it is up to each individual to make the most of the time between his/her birth and death. The first verse of the song establishes the theme that is repeated in the other verses: life is hard but one has the choice to adopt a positive outlook. The second verse is similar to the first, but the third verse introduces the idea that this life is all that one has. Death comes for everybody and is inescapable. The third verse extends an idea mentioned in the second verse: there is a performative aspect to life. Laughing, dancing, smiling, and singing are done for the benefit of the audience that ought to be left with a grin. That life is a performance speaks to the double vision that defines ironic faith. The performer knows that his/her life is a performance that will eventually end (death will eventually draw the final curtain). Whatever benefit is gained from mirth is ultimately meaningless because it is gained against the backdrop of a death that is the end of everything. That one’s efforts are meaningless in the ultimate sense is liberating because one has nothing to lose. The audience is encouraged in this attitude in the last verse when the

fatalism of the third verse (“life’s a piece of shit, when you look at it”) is transcended by the attitude that in light of death, no one has anything to lose because “you come from nothing – you’re going back to nothing.” The song is a success: the movie ends as the camera pulls back to show the prisoners singing and dancing along as best they can. The irony of “Always Look On the Bright Side of Life” is that there is probably no worse or more difficult time to look on the bright side of life than when one is being crucified. However, if one can find the bright side of life in that situation then it is possible to find it any situation. While some may see the joke as an effort to deny the possibility of finding anything positive about life, those who practice an ironic faith would be able to see the truth in the claim that though death takes everyone, it is still possible to make life meaningful by focusing on the small joys that are available to humans.

The ironic vision of Good and Critchley is an ethical vision of what the world has been called to be. It has been articulated and can be finalized. Others can share in the ironic vision and in the final form that the world will take. The absurdist vision that Berger and *Life of Brian* articulate does not have a form to take. Instead, it is an insight with no discernible and definable content; it is an approach with no destination. This is different from a community of people who are motivated by their ironic faith to change the world. It is a community of people who can laugh together. It is a community that recognizes itself in laughter. Laughing together, they perceive the incongruities that give rise to ironic faith. In laughing, one realizes what is truly important and how laughable and finite so many other concerns are. This laughter is one that reaffirms the difficulty and importance of being true to oneself and the many ways that the world makes it difficult to be who one is. The difficulties presented by the world and other people in defining the meaning of one’s life are lessened by the recognition that one is not laughing alone. The audience member who laughs at *Life of Brian* gets the joke and agrees with, at the very least,

members of Monty Python. By sharing that laughter with other people, the community is extended because the audience member laughs with the Monty Python troop and with other audience members. It is not an ethical community but is, instead, a community of ironists.

¹ Hannah, John, "John Cleese Sounds Off" *People* 05/10/2004, 61:8: 33.

² The release of *Life of Brian* was controversial. The film was released on August 17, 1979; the first protest was on August 19, 1979. Rabbi Benjamin Hecht, speaking for the ultra-conservative Rabbinical Alliance, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada and the Rabbinical Council of Syrian and Near Eastern Sephardic Communities of America claimed that the film was "grievously insulting" and was worried that showing it would result in violence. Robert E. A. Lee, who provided radio commentary for the Lutheran Council, said that the film was "crude and rude mockery, colossal bad taste, profane parody" and "a disgraceful and distasteful assault on religious sensibility." Not to be left out, the Roman Catholic Office for Film and Broadcasting rated *Life of Brian* "C" for "condemned" meaning that it was a sin to see the film. There were protests outside of theatres. All quotes were taken from Robert Hewison's *Monty Python: The Case Against* (Great Britain: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1981) 78-79.

³ To be fair, while it might have been their intention not to mock Jesus and the members of Monty Python can be taken at their word that the film skewers religion and not Jesus, the only way that the film could have gotten made and released was for Monty Python to go out of their way to convince the audience that Brian is not Jesus. Jesus is mentioned three times in *Life of Brian*. First, at the opening. The wise-men first come to see the infant Brian but quickly recognize their mistake when they glimpse the beatific glow emanating from the manger across the way. Next, the movie depicts Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount. There is no doubt that it is Jesus, and there is no doubt that it is the Sermon on the Mount, but the movie asks the audience to experience the event from the margins and the fringes of the crowd, where Jesus is hard to hear and the meaning of his words is easily confused and lost. The third mention of Jesus is from an ex-leper, now unemployed, who had been healed by Jesus. These three references to Jesus validate at least these gospel stories about Jesus, his teachings, and his ability to perform miracles and allow members of Monty Python to say that film is not about Jesus or his teachings. Despite how it helps them make jokes later on about Brian being mistaken for the messiah, it is fair to argue that the Monty Python troop included the three references to Jesus as a way to inoculate themselves from the controversy that a film like theirs would create. If this is the case, they did a very bad job.

⁴ That the film is about religion makes it broader and funnier; that the film is not about Jesus makes it safe to laugh at.

⁵ Morgan, David, *Monty Python Speaks* (New York: Avon Books, 1999) 226.

⁶ Ibid, 227.

⁷ Ibid, 247.

⁸ Ibid, 247.

⁹ Palin says, "So consequently I remember being tremendously rewarded by the attitude of some churchmen I knew and heard about who said, 'This is exactly what you should be saying, this is terrific that you've done a film like this. I want to show it to my congregation.' Members of a church at St. John's Wood, the guy said, 'We showed it to them, we had a discussion, we raised these points, we loved it, terrific.'" Ibid, 248-49.

¹⁰ Ibid, 249.

¹¹ Bergson writes that “inattention to self, and consequently to others, is what we invariably find. And if we look at the matter closely, we see that inattention is here equivalent to what we have called unsociability. The chief cause of rigidity is the neglect to look around—and more especially within oneself.” In Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* accessed via Project Gutenberg. (<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4352>) Chapter 3, section 1, par. 12.

¹² Ibid, Chapter 2, section 2, 35.

¹³ Ibid, Chapter 3, section 3, par. 3.

¹⁴ Bergson writes, “However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary. How often it has been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! On the other hand, how often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group!” Chapter 1, section 1, par. 3.

¹⁵ Whedbee, J. William. *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) 10.

¹⁶ Erickson, Stephen, “Is There Life After *Monty Python’s Meaning of Life?*” *Monty Python and Philosophy: Nudge Nudge, Think Think*, eds. Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch (Chicago: Open Court, 2006) 118.

¹⁷ All of the people at the stoning are women dressed as men. When asked by Cleese if there are any men present, they all respond with a high pitched “No! No! No!” before lowering their voices to sound more masculine.

¹⁸ Miller, Jerome, “Laughter and the Absurd Economy of Celebration,” *Cross Currents* 45:2 (Summer 1995): 5.

¹⁹ Faison, Stephen, “God Forgive Us,” *Monty Python and Philosophy*, 139.

²⁰ The joke is that the crowd agrees, in unison, that they are all individuals ... except for one man who insists that he is not an individual.

²¹ Good, Edwin, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) 17.

²² *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*. Directed by Terry Jones. 1979. New York, NY, 1999. DVD.

²³ Good, p. 246.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 244.

²⁵ Critchley, 16. Laughter is a sign of agreement and a shared worldview—that is how Critchley accounts for different people both identifying the same joke as funny. Therefore, laughter reveals the audience’s concerns, beliefs, and attitudes. From there, Critchley ties humor to authority and power by the ability to use laughter to force agreement about how the world is and what something means. When someone more powerful ridicules someone or something less powerful, it can be funny, but that sort of humor is divisive and exclusionary. This is a cruel laughter that exploits weaknesses and foibles by putting down others. Laughter directed at the powerless and marginalized serves to reinforce stereotypes and norms—here, laughter is conservative. If the Bible is a comedy, then that comedy cannot be at the expense of the less powerful. Instead, it is at the expense of the powerful and the authoritative. Critchley, Simon, *On Humour* (New York: Routledge, 2002)

²⁶ Stokes, Jim. “Where Does ‘Jest’s Prosperity’ Lie? Comedy and Community” *World Order*, 31:1 (Fall 1999): 27.

²⁷ Ibid, 27.

²⁸ *Life of Brian*.

²⁹ Berger, Peter. *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1997), x.

³⁰ Ibid, 182.

³¹ Auxier, Randall E., "A Very Naughty Boy: Getting Right With Brian," *Monty Python and Philosophy*, 71.

³² Some things in life are bad
They can really make you mad
Other things just make you swear and curse.
When you're chewing on life's gristle
Don't grumble, give a whistle
And this'll help things turn out for the best...

And...always look on the bright side of life...
Always look on the light side of life...

If life seems jolly rotten
There's something you've forgotten
And that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing.
When you're feeling in the dumps
Don't be silly chumps
Just purse your lips and whistle - that's the thing.

And...always look on the bright side of life...
Always look on the light side of life...

For life is quite absurd
And death's the final word
You must always face the curtain with a bow.
Forget about your sin - give the audience a grin
Enjoy it - it's your last chance anyhow.
So always look on the bright side of death
Just before you draw your terminal breath
Life's a piece of shit
When you look at it
Life's a laugh and death's a joke, it's true.
You'll see it's all a show
Keep 'em laughing as you go
Just remember that the last laugh is on you.

And always look on the bright side of life...
Always look on the right side of life...

(Come on guys, cheer up!)
Always look on the bright side of life...
Always look on the bright side of life...
(Worse things happen at sea, you know.)
Always look on the bright side of life...
(I mean - what have you got to lose?)
(You know, you come from nothing - you're going back to nothing.
What have you lost? Nothing!)
Always look on the right side of life...
Life of Brian

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