

***LAUGHING YOUR WAY
TO GRACE:
A STUDY IN HUMOR
AND THE SACRED***

A Master of Divinity Thesis
Union Theological Seminary
Susan G. Sparks
Fall 2002

© *All Rights Reserved*
Do Not Reproduce Without Permission

CONTENTS

Preface	3
Chapters	
I. INTRODUCTION	4
Goals of the Thesis, Overview, and Definitions	
II. WHY WE SEPARATE HUMOR AND THE SACRED	10
A. Humor in Pre- and Early Christianity	
B. Forces which Exorcised Humor from the Church	
1. Power	
2. Disembodied Theology	
3. Fear	
C. Scripture	
III. THE POWER OF UNITING HUMOR AND THE SACRED	32
A. Laughter in the Vestibule	
B. Laughter in the Sanctuary	
C. Laughter in the Holy of Holies	
IV. CONCLUSION (<i>A HEAVENLY POSTSCRIPT</i>)	55
Bibliography	57

PREFACE

*The Disciples sought to learn from the Master the stages he had passed through
in his quest for the divine.*

*“God first led me by the hand,” he said, “into the Land of Action, and there I
dwelt for several years.*

*Then He returned and led me to the Land of Sorrows; there I lived until my heart
was purged of every inordinate attachment.*

*That is when I found myself in the Land of Love, whose burning flames consumed
whatever was left in me of self.*

*This brought me to the Land of Silence, where the mysteries of life and death were
bared before my wondering eyes.”*

“Was that the final stage of your quest?” they asked.

*“No,” the Master said. “One day God said, ‘Today I shall take you to the
innermost sanctuary of the Temple, to the very heart of God....’*

And I was led to the Land of Laughter.”

-Anthony de Mello, Taking Flight

“LAUGHING YOUR WAY TO GRACE: A STUDY OF HUMOR AND THE SACRED”

© All Rights Reserved

**A MASTER OF DIVINITY THESIS
UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
SUSAN SPARKS
FALL 2002**

I. INTRODUCTION

*“God is a comedian playing to an audience that is afraid to laugh.”
-Voltaire*

We are afraid to laugh with God. Perhaps this is because Christians don't get the joke. Maybe we have been preconditioned to believe that God is not funny. Or perhaps the church has simply forgotten its humanity. Whatever the reason, God's act is not getting much of a response, and I ask why.

Certainly, there are parts of our humanity we believe appropriate to offer in holy realms. We come slump-shouldered before God, proudly bearing our remorse, our fears, our self-denial, and our suffering. Yet, the part of our humanity that laughs is usually hidden away in shame.

Ironically, we bring laughter and humor into most other aspects of life. For example, humor is widely acknowledged to be an effective tool in the world of work. Corporations across the country offer training on humor in the workplace to address

everything from presentation skills to employee mental health.¹ After the workday ends, sitcoms and late night comedians are invited into our living rooms to calm and entertain us. When illness looms, modern medicine hails humor as an alternative healing tool shown to stimulate the immune system and increase the body's ability to protect itself against viruses, bacteria, and even cancer.² As a result, hospital clowns are now commonplace. Laughing clubs, where people gather for breathing exercises, play, and group laughter, are the new nationwide rage.³ Many hospitals and medical facilities even utilize humor rooms where patients, family, and staff can laugh, play, and relax together.⁴

What is particularly striking is that we usher humor into some of our most vulnerable spaces, such as hospice and grief work.⁵ In Holland, funeral clowns are utilized by undertakers to lighten the mood.⁶ We even see humor used in disaster relief, including at ground zero.⁷ Yet, with all our acknowledgements of the power and healing nature of humor, we check it at the doors of our houses of worship like we check our coats.

Our human reticence to laugh or play with God points to a deeply rooted block in our spiritual relationships. Do we believe humor inappropriate before God? According to

¹ Esther Blumenfeld and Lynne Alpern, Humor at Work (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1994); Terry L. Paulson, Making Humor Work: Take Your Job Seriously and Yourself Lightly (Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1989).

² Patty Wooten, R.N., Compassionate Laughter: Jest for Your Health (Salt Lake City, Utah: Commune-A-Key Publishing, 1996), 30.

³ Information is available at: <http://www.worldlaughtertour.com>.

⁴ Wooten, Compassionate Laughter, 93.

⁵ Allen Klein, The Courage to Laugh: Humor, Hope and Healing in the Face of Death and Dying (New York: Tarcher Putnam, 1998).

⁶ "Dutch Undertakers Hire Clown to Lighten the Mood," Ananova News, 24 October 2002; available from http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_695983.html.

⁷ In acting as a Red Cross grief counselor in the days following 9/11, I spoke with a young mother of three whose husband was missing. In talking with me, she began laughing hysterically and said "he left the house with the worst tie on you have ever seen. I told him not to wear it." After a few moments of silence, she then said, "You know, laughter may seem strange at a time like this, but it's the only thing my family and I have left."

whom? God? Are we afraid to be fully human with God? Why? The following thesis will explore these questions from several perspectives. First, it will look at why we tend to separate humor and the sacred. What are the historical, theological, and psychological reasons for this separation? This thesis will then look at integrating humor and the sacred from a practical perspective. How can we best utilize humor in our spiritual lives and in worship and ritual? What will it yield?

Granted, exaggeration is the cornerstone of humor, but it is not an exaggeration to frame the stakes of this issue around two critical points: the viability of the church⁸ and the quality and meaning of our spiritual relationships.

First, notwithstanding a growing Western interest in spirituality,⁹ the church is facing an existential crisis. As Mark Riddell, Mark Pierson, and Cathy Kirkpatrick explain in The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church,

God is back on the agenda, but Christians should not get prematurely excited about the fact. There is no enthusiasm for association with institutional forms of religion, and indeed a great deal of suspicion about them. One of the sad facts is that people alert to the reality of God never even consider that a church would be a place to help them on their journey. Even more tragic is that an increasing number of Christians might be tempted to agree with them.¹⁰

The reason for this crisis is unclear. Some say it is the church's inability to make connections to basic human needs, such as the need to love or be loved, or the fear of

⁸ Throughout this thesis, the term "church" refers to mainline Protestant denominations, including, but not limited to, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, Dutch Reform, and Baptist. The focus of this thesis is limited to these denominations, as they tend to be the most limited in their use of humor in spiritual practices.

⁹ Any doubts in this regard may be alleviated by perusing the halls of consumption. Angel pins line most every checkout line. Macy's is selling Buddha t-shirts. Benedictine monks market their top-ten chants CD's next to gangsta rap and techno-pop. Even the networks recognize this phenomenon, marketing such shows as *Touched by an Angel* and the blockbuster hit *The Simpsons*. Mark I. Pinsky, The Gospel According to the Simpsons (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 2, 8. Consider also <http://www.hollywoodJesus.com>, a website dedicated to discussions of spirituality in movies and culture.

¹⁰ Mark Riddell, Mark Pierson and Cathy Kirkpatrick, The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2000), 27.

death and dying.¹¹ Others find it devoid of relevance or passion. A frustrated congregation member explained it this way:

We can't enter into worship on Sunday and embark on a pedestrian wade through a four hymn sandwich without setting aside the "holy" experience of a bar we spent last night in, listening to a funky soul singer, and sipping Irish coffee...And we often want to cringe in church when we sing a melodic jingle about loving Jesus, when we think of our soul soaring as we play U2's complex "Pop" album loud on our CD player at home.¹²

An exception to this is the evangelical church, which is experiencing exponential growth. A large majority of these churches utilize creative and alternative approaches to liturgy, including humor. For example, numerous publications and videos on "Christian humor" are flooding the market. Christian standup comedians (with decidedly conservative messages) are becoming commonplace.¹³ There is even a charismatic movement out of Toronto, Canada in which religious followers "shake with laughter and roll about in the aisles."¹⁴ While humor is not the only reason for the exponential growth of the evangelical church, its obvious contribution cannot be ignored.

That said, these examples from the evangelical church are but a glimmer of what humor can do. A truly holistic approach to worship, one in which our anger, our tears, and our laughter are welcomed into the sanctuary, might begin a long-awaited reconciliation between the Christian church at large and those who feel alienated from it.

Humor and the sacred also hold a critical key to our spiritual relationships. Do we have to laugh with God in order to be close to God? Certainly not. Must we be honest

¹¹ Janet R. Walton, *Art and Worship: A Vital Connection* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 14.

¹² Riddell, *The Prodigal Project*, 13.

¹³ For example, see <http://www.comedycrusade.com/> or <http://www.sheeplaughs.com/list.htm>, each offering extensive lists of Christian standup comedians.

¹⁴ Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), 120.

with God in order to foster meaningful intimacy? Absolutely, and that includes offering all of ourselves to the relationship. Jung wrote about the shadow self—the part of our psyche that we choose to hide as shameful or inappropriate¹⁵—but wholeness comes from integrating all parts of the self. Our spiritual relationships are no different. If we carve our laughter out from our spiritual relationship, we risk diminishing, even destroying, the very spiritual intimacy we all seek. If we want healing, we must give God all the pieces.

One final introductory matter must be addressed. Mark Twain once said that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and lightning bug. Therefore, we must clarify what is meant by “humor.”

To define “humor” is almost impossible, as humor is a moving target wholly contingent upon social and cultural settings. It has been called everything from a “a rumor of angels”¹⁶ to a sexual release.¹⁷ Many have attempted to articulate the “classic” definition of humor. For example, Plato argued that laughter originates from a perceived discrepancy between being and appearance in other people.¹⁸ Henri Bergson offered a variation on this theory when he posited that laughter emanates from the “mechanical encrusted on something living.”¹⁹ For Thomas Hobbes, one laughs if one feels superior to other people.²⁰

Today, the most widely accepted humor theory is the incongruity theory. First articulated by Blaise Pascal, it holds that “nothing produces laughter more than a

¹⁵ Carl Jung, *The Portable Jung*, Joseph Campbell, ed. (New York: Penguin, 1971), 144-148.

¹⁶ Richard G. Cote, *Holy Mirth: A Theology of Laughter* (Stoughton, Massachusetts: The Alpine Press, 1986), 20.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960).

¹⁸ Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 134, n. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees.”²¹ For example, we laugh at the proud person slipping on the ice based on the contrast between his or her dignity and undignified plight.

For the purposes of this thesis, we will engage this incongruity theory of humor. We will also consider broader dimensions of humor, including spontaneity, clowning, and festival. It is critical to acknowledge the extremely broad and often nebulous nature of humor, as it will enable us to transcend the centuries of historical, theological, and psychological barriers that have shunned humor within the Christian tradition.

²¹ Tad Friend, “What’s So Funny,” *The New Yorker*, 11 November 2002, 80.

II. WHY WE SEPARATE HUMOR AND THE SACRED

*“The challenge of bringing together humor and the sacred was left untried because the challenge was just too difficult.”
-G.K. Chesterton*

If a window remains dirty long enough, we come to believe that the world is shrouded in a light brown haze. In this way, Christians have inherited a tradition in which the dirty window has become the reality. Humor has been excluded from our tradition for so long that we believe its absence organic to our institution. However, as Harvey Cox explains in The Feast of Fools, “The truth may very well be that we have inherited a recently perverted form of Christianity, that its terrible sobriety is a distortion of its real genius, and that a kind of playfulness lies much closer to its heart than solemnity does.”²² Perhaps we need to take a long look at our tradition. Maybe we need to “do” some windows. Was humor consciously excluded from the Christian tradition at some point? If so, when, and for what reason?

We will analyze these questions in three parts. The first part will explore the presence of humor in pre- and early Christianity. The second will identify and evaluate three forces that systematically exorcised humor from within the realms of the Christian movement: power, disembodied theology, and fear. Finally, we will look at the effect of such forces on scripture, including an analysis of recent biblical criticism regarding humor.

²² Harvey Cox, The Feast of Fools (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 54.

A. HUMOR IN PRE- AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Acknowledgement of the synergies between humor and the sacred dates as early as the fifteenth century BCE. The oldest known written source on laughter is the Akkadian myth of Adapa, written on a clay tablet between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries BCE. The story recorded the laughter of the God Anu at the mortal Adapa's attempt at eternal life.²³ Similarly, the Mesopotamians employed humor in their myths, such as the story of the God Marduk stuffing dung into the ear of an overly loud goat or in love lyrics alluding to flatulence as an enemy of intimacy.²⁴ In the cult of Baal-Aliyn as well as in Greek culture, laughter provided a direct and sometimes frenetic way to merge with the divine.²⁵ Perhaps the most striking example of humor and the sacred is found in an Egyptian creation myth in which regenerative laughter brings forth life: "When God laughed, seven gods were born to rule the world...When he burst out laughing there was light...When he burst out laughing the second time, the waters were born; at the seventh burst of laughter, the soul was born."²⁶

Similarly, there was a rich use of humor in the early Christian movement. One of the most striking examples of humor within early Christianity is found in the Gnostic community. Ultimately excluded from the final Christian canon, most of the Gnostic writings were confiscated and even destroyed. However, after over 1500 years, an incredible collection of Gnostic writings (thirteen books with fifty-three texts) was

²³ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 14.

²⁴ *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3, "Humor and Wit," 328-329.

²⁵ Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 18; Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 48.

²⁶ Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 1.

discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945.²⁷ It is within many of these writings that we find not only humor, but also a startling new Jesus—a laughing Jesus. In *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, for example, Jesus laughs as he comforts and greets his disciples. “My peace I give to you! And they all marveled and were afraid. The Savior laughed and said to them, ‘Why are you perplexed? What are you searching for?’”²⁸ Similarly, in *The Apocryphon of John*, Jesus “smiles” throughout the text in response to John’s many questions.²⁹ We see a twist of irony in *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*. In this text, Jesus laughs at those who crucified him, as it was the material Jesus and not Jesus the Christ that they killed: “[I]t was another, their father, who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I...it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder...But I was rejoicing in the height over...their error, of their empty glory. And I was laughing at their ignorance.”³⁰

The Gnostics were not the only early Christian community to employ laughter. Other early apocryphal Christian writings, for instance, share the story of a laughing mother and newborn Jesus that did not cry like other children, but “laughed and smiled with the most sweet smile.”³¹ Even the early Christian martyrs acknowledged and harnessed the power of humor and irony. Tradition holds that Lawrence, a deacon who suffered on a red-hot grill in Rome, joked to his tormentors: “turn me around, I am really roasted on that side.”³²

²⁷ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 69.

²⁸ John Dart, *The Laughing Savior* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 111.

²⁹ *The Apocryphon of John* (13:17-21, 22:10-15, 26:20-25); Dart, *The Laughing Savior*, 111.

³⁰ *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (VII, 55:30-56); James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978), 365.

³¹ Kuschel, *A Theology of Laughter*, 71.

³² Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 69.

Many Christians' early freedom with humor and laughter was grounded in their alienation from power and worldly convention. Organized in tiny, disjointed communities, the fledgling religion struggled in its first several hundred years to find a place amid Judaism, the Roman government, and even competing Christian communities. As Cox explains in The Feast of Fools, "Mockery may be a trait common to all new and struggling religious movements—especially those which feel particularly alienated from society or conventional religious expressions. The laughter serves as an answer for the ridicule of outsiders and as a way of supporting one another—laughing at the ignorant opposition."³³

We see examples of such mockery in early Christian art. In one of the earliest representations of Christ, from the catacomb paintings, Christ is depicted as a crucified man with the head of an ass.³⁴ According to Cox,

those catacomb Christians had a deeper sense of the comic absurdity of their position than we think they did. A wretched band of slaves, derelicts, and square pegs, they must have sensed occasionally how ludicrous their claims appeared. They knew they were fools for Christ, but also claimed that the foolishness of God was wiser than the wisdom of men. Christ himself for them must have been something of a Holy Fool.³⁵

Great changes were to come about in the fourth century when Christianity's social location shifted from the outer fringes of society to the ruling religion of the world's most powerful empire. Now, rather than being in opposition to the world's power, Christianity was at its center.

³³ Dart, The Laughing Savior, 133.

³⁴ Bastien, Joseph, "Humor and Satire," Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: McMillan, 1987), 527.

³⁵ Cox, The Feast of Fools, 140.

B. FORCES WHICH EXORCISED HUMOR FROM THE CHURCH

1. POWER

In 320 CE, Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Harvey Cox suggests that this change in status from social outcast to ruling state religion prompted the suppression of Christianity's comic spirit:

The symbol of Christ the clown seems imminently right for the earliest period of Christian history. It could not persist, however, when the church's view of itself moved from the ridiculous to the sublime. What place is there for caricature when the church's regal vestments are taken seriously? When its crowns and scepters are made of real gold instead of thorns and wood? A church that actually holds power and reigns has little capacity for self-caricature or irony.³⁶

Christianity had transformed from the jester to the king, and as a result, it had to learn a new skill—namely, how to own and maintain power. The church, particularly the medieval church, was well aware of laughter's power in terms of political liberation and revolution. Consequently, its efforts to control this force led to a rigid and formalistic faith practice, one which had little place for laughter and humor:

The church took a hard line against laughter as a way of protecting itself, for it recognized laughter as the nexus, the weak point, which connected all authority with the general population...If organized religion hoped to remain organized, only seriousness would keep it solidly together...laughter slips away from authority and into the masses. Jokes constantly threaten to break out and overwhelm those who would control them. In such a volatile political atmosphere, the church could not afford many such slips.³⁷

By the Middle Ages, we see an almost complete exorcism of humor from the church's hallowed halls, and outside those halls, humor was embraced only to the limited

³⁶ Ibid., 141.

³⁷ Sanders, Sudden Glory, 146.

extent that it empowered the church's suffocating control. Manifesting itself through street festivals and morality plays, humor was reduced to a tool to defuse the oppressive, sometimes tyrannical rule of the church. A medieval priest used the metaphor of wine barrels to explain the need for this revelry: "Foolishness, which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man, might freely spend itself at least once a year. Wine barrels burst if from time to time we do not open them and let in some air."³⁸

On Holy Innocents Day, for example, the Bishop was replaced with a small boy in an effort to return the church, if only for a day, to the playfulness of a child. The boy would officiate at services, preside over other ecclesiastical positions (also filled by children), and ultimately give the Episcopal blessing from the residence of the Archbishop.³⁹

Similarly, the Feast of Fools ridiculed the hierarchies of the church. This festival commenced at Vespers upon the reading of a particular section of the Magnificat: "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree" (Luke 1:52). Throughout the day, there was a complete upheaval of the established offices of the church:

[E]ven ordinarily pious priests and serious townsfolk donned bawdy masks, sang outrageous ditties, and generally kept the whole world awake with revelry and satire. Minor clerics painted their faces, strutted about in the robes of their superiors, and mocked the stately rituals of church and court.⁴⁰

Finally, there was the Feast of the Ass, which was a reenactment of the flight into Egypt. This festival began with a procession led through town by a donkey and culminated in a mass in which the donkey was ridden into the sanctuary by a young girl

³⁸ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 80.

³⁹ Conrad Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 118.

⁴⁰ Cox, *The Feast of Fools*, 3.

carrying an infant. As if this were not festive enough, during the mass, the people would bray “Haw, Sir Ass, he-haw” instead of offering the expected Latin responses.⁴¹

Another form of these street festivals was found in the late fourteenth century’s York cycle of mystery plays. Performed annually on the feast of Corpus Christi, these biblical dramas freely used humor. One such play featured an embarrassed gaggle of Roman soldiers, who, in preparing the cross, had bored the holes incorrectly so that Jesus’ body did not fit.⁴² Another told the story of the building of the ark, portraying Noah as an inept buffoon.⁴³ In this drama, when God asked Noah to build the ark, Noah replied that he knew nothing of shipbuilding and reminded God that he was old, out of shape, and “disinclined to do a day’s work unless great need constrained [him].”⁴⁴

One notable exception to the medieval church’s stance against humor was the Holy Fool tradition honored by the Orthodox Church. These saints appeared as early as the sixth century in the Greek Orthodox Church and reached their height in the Russian Orthodox Church between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries.⁴⁵ Based on the Pauline teaching in 1 Corinthians 4:10 (“We are fools for Christ’s sake”), a type of sainthood developed in which “the expression of piety was that of publicly making a fool

⁴¹ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 119.

⁴² “The Pinners: The Crucifixion,” Richard Beadle and Pamela M. King, eds., *York Mystery Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 211; John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 119.

⁴³ Cox, *Feast of Fools*, 152.

⁴⁴ “The Shipwrights: The Building of the Ark,” Beadle and King, eds., *York Mystery Plays*, 7, n. 51-52; Compare another rendition of the Noah/God dialogue five hundred years later by comedian Bill Cosby. In Cosby’s routine, Noah tells God he knows nothing about arks or cubits. He then complains bitterly about the “two by two,” especially with regard to mosquitoes and rabbits (which, once on board, are hard to keep to the original limit). *Bill Cosby is a Very Funny Fellow, Right!* Warner Brothers, 1963.

⁴⁵ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 119.

of oneself...becom[ing], in effect a jester to the Church...in a comic identification with the humility and humiliation of Jesus.”⁴⁶

Examples of such Holy Fools included Andrew the Fool (seventh century) who lived a life of feigned madness and spent much of his time naked, homeless, and sleeping on a dung heap.⁴⁷ Basil the Blessed, a Russian figure, dedicated himself to justice and the plight of the poor. It is famous lore that during the fasting of Lent, he offered a plate of raw meat to Ivan the Terrible as a statement against Ivan’s murderous politics and as a moral warning that fasting would not save him from hell.⁴⁸ In the sixteenth century, Saint Philip Neri, the church’s great practical joker, used humor and clowning to emphasize the importance of humility. Neri, for example, insisted that his highest protegee carry Neri’s aged and very fat dog, Capriccio, in their holy processions through the local villages.⁴⁹

Eventually, the church began to find even these controlled festivals and fools dangerous. The church saw a certain ‘pagan’ aura that clung to comedy—a “demonic suggestiveness about the comic mask, if not a bit of the rogue Satan himself in the devilish gleam in the eyes of the harlequin.”⁵⁰ The Holy Fool tradition and the annual

⁴⁶ Derek Krueger, Symeon The Holy Fool: Leontius’s Life and the Late Antique City (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 119-120.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth-Anne Stewart, Jesus the Holy Fool (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 1999), 188.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴⁹ Paul Turks, Philip Neri: The Fire of Joy (New York: Alba House, 1995), 53-56.

⁵⁰ Conrad Hyers, Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 21; This ecclesiastical fear is colorfully captured in Umberto Eco’s book, In the Name of the Rose. The book centers around Jorge, an old Benedictine Monk, who fights to keep the only known copy of Aristotle’s treatise on comedy (his second book of *Poetics*) hidden from the world. Jorge’s behavior is driven by a concern that laughter destroys fear; and without fear, there is no devil; and without a devil, there is no need for God. Umberto Eco, In the Name of the Rose (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1980), 474.

feasts and festivals were eventually outlawed based on this ecclesiastical fear.⁵¹ Over the next several hundred years, the church slowly lost power and, as a result, its need to control humor. Today, the popularity of festivals and fools in Christianity has all but disappeared. The great doors of the church may have cracked open, but the church did its medieval job so well that there are no fools or festivals left to come in.

2. DISEMBODIED THEOLOGY

While power played a major role in the demise of humor within the church, we see a similar attack through early Christian theology, specifically with regard to its view of the human body. Medieval theology was a theology of otherworldliness. The focus for the faithful was on the transcendent—the spiritual heaven not tainted by the evil of the world. As Kuschel explains, “[t]he theme which the medieval church kept striking up again and again was not enjoyment and pleasure, but contempt and the overcoming of this world...Indeed in the Middle Ages, there was no theology of laughter, but there was theology of tears.”⁵²

The human body, tainted from the original fall, was considered an inherent part of this evil. This view was nurtured by many factors, including the legacy of the Judaic purity laws. Portions of Leviticus, for example, focused on the unclean nature of the body due to childbirth, sexual relations, skin diseases, or bodily fluids. The scriptures detail rituals, including bathing and sin offerings, that must be performed in order for the

⁵¹ The Feast of Fools was condemned by the Council of Basil in 1431. Bastien, “Humor and Satire,” Encyclopedia of Religion, 527; Later, in the seventeenth century, the church authorities discontinued the canonization of Holy Fools. Stewart, Jesus the Holy Fool, 190.

⁵² Kuschel, Laughter, 48.

body to become “clean.”⁵³ Similarly, suspicions towards the human body stemmed from the influence of Gnosticism on early Christianity through its dualistic views of matter and the divine.

Interestingly, Christianity, in opposition to most other religions at the time, upheld a belief in the salvation of the soul and the body. The crucified savior and his bodily resurrection was at the core of an early Christian theology which held that the body was destined for salvation and as such, had to be continually worked upon, changed, and reshaped.⁵⁴ As laughter was intimately linked to the body, it, too, was to be controlled and suppressed.⁵⁵ Gilhus argues that “[i]t is not surprising that with the ascendance of Christianity, the traditional sources of laughter were attacked...When religious symbolism centres (sic) around literal texts and on an ideal human body, marked by chastity and a continent life, laughter is bound to become a stranger.”⁵⁶

The theology of the early church fathers and mothers reflected this view of laughter as a sign of humanity’s depraved state—a laughter of carnality.⁵⁷ Clement of Alexandria was the one of the first Christian thinkers who addressed the subject of laughter and humor. He believed that laughter, like the body, should be strictly

⁵³ Leviticus, Chapters 12-15.

⁵⁴ Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 11.

⁵⁵ Similarly, certain forms of music were held suspect by the early church, as music favored flesh over the spirit and was considered “intrinsically sensual...leading to the excitement of the lower passions.” Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 15.

⁵⁶ Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 58. Alternatively, those cultures and religions that tend to honor the body also honor laughter. For example, ancient Near East and Greek cultures honored the human body as critical not only to individual human life, but also to the universal life force itself, and similarly, they honored laughter: “Joyful laughter made the world vibrate with life. Laughter was a cosmic force. Linked to eroticism, laughter created and recreated the world” (Ibid., 3, 9). Other examples of this parallel between perceptions of the body and laughter can be found in Mesopotamia and Egypt, as well as in the religions of the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism, for example, revels in the beauty of the human body as well as the wonder of human laughter. This is illustrated by the God Krishna, the trickster, who is portrayed as a small baby engaged in playful, childlike conduct, and the God Ganesh, the laughing elephant-headed figure who celebrates new beginnings. See Lee Siegel, Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁵⁷ Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 69.

controlled. In *Paidagogos*, Clement explained, “We need not take away from man any of the things that are natural to him, but only set a limit and due proportion to them. It is true that man is an animal who can laugh; but it is not true that he therefore should laugh at everything.”⁵⁸

Similarly, Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century Rhineland mystic, argued that “laughter gives dramatic proof of our depraved state...involuntary outbursts necessary only because humanity’s souls have been darkened by sin.”⁵⁹ Hugh of Saint Victor, one of the most influential twelfth-century writers, called laughter “in every respect evil.”⁶⁰ Likewise, the Cappadocian Father Basil warned, “The Christian ought in all things to become superior to the righteousness existing under the law... He ought not to indulge in jesting; he ought not to laugh nor even to suffer laugh-makers.”⁶¹ Even Saint Augustine commented, “Human beings laugh and weep, and it is a matter for weeping that they laugh!”⁶²

Ascetic Christianity took a similar stand against laughter and humor, as they were considered to undermine the very foundations of monastic life. The oldest monastic rule, Pachom’s from Egypt, subjected the monks to punishment if they joked or laughed at prayer or mealtimes.⁶³ The fifth-century *Regula Patrium Serapionis* ordered that any monks overcome by laughter ought to be punished by two weeks of “the scourge of humility” (*flagello humilitatis*).⁶⁴ Saint Benedict promulgated what evolved into the monastic norm concerning laughter: “Rule 53: ‘Do not speak idle words, or such as to

⁵⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁹ Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 129.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 128-129.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Kuschel, *Laughter*, 45.

⁶³ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 64.

⁶⁴ Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 134.

move to laughter’ and Rule 54: ‘Do not love great or excessive laughter.’”⁶⁵ Honored models of such rules included Saint Anthony, who, like the saints Eugendus and Martin of Tours, was famous for never having laughed.⁶⁶ Similarly, the famous Syrian writer Ephraem spoke of laughter’s dangers: “Laughter is the beginning of destruction of soul; o monk, when you notice something of that, know that you have arrived at the depth of the evil.”⁶⁷

The influence of this theology continued into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, a sect of Baptists in 1655 made their members swear a holy oath that they would never make jokes—in public or in private.⁶⁸ Similarly, the Puritans criminalized laughter in their services, as they believed it belonged to original sin.⁶⁹

This disembodied theology still wields influence. Certain fundamental Baptists regulate bodily movement through dancing, as it is considered linked to sin and immorality.⁷⁰ Other denominations and sects advocate conservative covering of the body.⁷¹ We also see a general societal discomfort with the body through controversies over appropriate bodily images in art.⁷² If we are to begin to dismantle the barriers between humor and the sacred, we must acknowledge the continuing influence of this theology and examine our Christian and Western perspectives regarding the human body.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 135.

⁶⁶ Sanders, Sudden Glory, 134.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 224.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 221, 225; Morreall, Comedy, Tragedy and Religion, 118.

⁷⁰ Information may be found at <http://www.wayoflife.org/fbns/dancing/html>.

⁷¹ The Amish Mennonites, for example, advocate tradition dress and head coverings. F. L. Cross, ed., The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 52.

⁷² For example, in 1987, nude images by photographer Robert Mapplethorpe were the subject of a lawsuit against the Cincinnati Museum of Art.

3. FEAR

The status of humor within the Christian tradition was (and still is) undermined by fear. In short, we are scared to laugh with God. Ironically, this fear stems from an image of God that we created: a strict, stern, sometimes vengeful disciplinarian.

From birth on, we gather information to construct our personal images of God. As Ana-Maria Rizzuto has explained, “[t]he developmental process of forming a God representation is exceedingly complex and is influenced by a multitude of cultural, social, familial and individual phenomena ranging from the deepest biological levels of human experience to the subtlest of spiritual realizations.”⁷³ Freud said it most succinctly when he asserted that the Genesis process is actually reversed, for it is man who creates God in his own image.⁷⁴ This inquiry is important, as it informs us about the nature of God—as we have created God. According to Marcus Borg and Ross Mackenzie,

How we see God matters. It matters not because God wants us to get it right, as if what God is most concerned about is correct ideas and beliefs. Rather, it matters because how we see God matters to us. Our concepts of God can make God seem real or unreal, remote or near. Our images of God shape our sense of the character of God and of what taking God seriously is about, indeed what the Christian life is about.⁷⁵

We draw from a number of sources in our lives to construct this representation of God. One of the most powerful sources is Scripture. Common biblical metaphors of God as king, lord, master, and judge contribute to an image of God as a strict, fearful disciplinarian. The book of Exodus, for instance, introduces us to a God who kills the

⁷³ Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 182.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁵ Marcus Borg and Ross Mackenzie, eds., *God at 2000* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 2.

first born of [his] enemies and buries their armies in a raging sea (Exodus 12:29, 14:27). King David's poetry speaks of an all-powerful God whose fiery anger rocks the heavens and the earth: "Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth...the foundations of the world were laid bare at the rebuke of the Lord, at the blast of the breath of his nostrils."⁷⁶ The Psalmist sings of a God who grants no mercy for the wicked:

O God, break the teeth in their mouths...Let them vanish like water that runs away; like grass, let them be trodden down and wither; Let them be like the snail which dissolves into slime...make them totter by thy power, and bring them down...consume them in wrath, consume them till they are no more.⁷⁷

This imagery is deeply ingrained in Christian theology. John Calvin, for example, cowered before a vengeful, wrathful God:

"And surely, O Lord...we know that for the justest causes thy wrath is kindled against us...[and] though thou mightest take much severer punishment upon us than before, and thus inflict blows an hundredfold more numerous...we confess that we are worthy of them, and have merited them by our crimes."⁷⁸

Twentieth-century theologian Dorothee Sollee explains: "The God who produces suffering and causes affliction becomes the glorious theme of a theology that directs our attention to the God who demands the impossible and tortures people."⁷⁹

Yet another source for our images of God is the father archetype. Thanks to thousands of years of patriarchal rule, God has almost uniformly been depicted as the

⁷⁶ 2 Samuel 22:9-10, 16.

⁷⁷ Psalms 58:6-8, 11-13.

⁷⁸ Dorothee Sollee, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 22.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

“father.” This language triggers images of father and of parents from our own childhood experiences. According to Ann and Barry Ulanov,

Our pictures of God come from the memories of real experience of dependency on our parents, and their responses to us. They come from our own fantasies about our parents’ responses, in which we endow them with better or worse actions than they performed...They are the result of impulses we cannot accept or escape in ourselves—usually of aggression and anger—that we delegate to this surrogate champion.⁸⁰

Our relationship with God is driven by this projection. As Borg explains, “When we image the monarchial God as a parent...it is as the critical parent...God functions as a divine superego in our heads, a voice that ranges and rages along a spectrum from ‘You’re never quite good enough’ to ‘You’re no good.’”⁸¹

Interestingly, we are unwilling to dismantle this stern divine image. This hesitancy exists for several reasons. First, we want a powerful authority figure for God. A laughing, familiar God—a buddy—is not what we need or want. How can a laughing God help an unemployed single parent with a drug habit? Does a joyful, smiling God help someone who is facing the death of a child? Ann and Barry Ulanov suggest that “[w]e need someone larger than life who understands us and our fears. We want a God who will guarantee that life will be fair in the end, that the wicked will be punished and the good rewarded.”⁸²

Ironically, if we deconstruct these limited images of the divine, we may find that the comic is the source of power, as “[t]he comic sensibility can laugh at those who ferment wars and perpetuate hunger at the same time it struggles to dethrone them...The

⁸⁰ Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 28.

⁸¹ Borg, *God at 2000*, 10.

⁸² Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech*, 28.

comic, more than the tragic, because it ignites hope, leads to more, not less, participation in the struggle for a just world.”⁸³ We must trust that God is big enough to wield both power and humor.

Second, there are those who simply will not consider an alternative to a strict, stern divine image out of fear of blasphemy. To address this, we must consider the relative nature of the term “blasphemy,” for an affront to the sacred is frequently judged by those in power: “Blasphemous humor puts the question: Who really is offended?...[A]ccusations of blasphemy are frequently made by, and designed to serve the interests of, those who have power...But it is often a human rather than a divine realm that is at stake.”⁸⁴ We must look at who accuses and what is at stake, for there is a big difference between theological offense and theological truth. Indeed, pride may be the more blasphemous threat. As Hyers explains, “far from being a sign of the fall of man, and a trespass upon the holy ground of the sacred, the absence of humor and the loss of the comic perspective signifies the pride symbolized by the fall, and comedy a reminder of paradise-lost.”⁸⁵

We must examine this fearful limiting of the image of God in order to reframe the divine in broader, richer, and more powerful terms. We must do so in order to bring humor back to the spiritual search.

C. SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

⁸³ Cox, Feast of Fools, 153.

⁸⁴ Graeme Garrett, “The Most Significant Event Our Faith Has to Offer?” in God Matters: Conversations in Theology (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 24-25.

⁸⁵ Hyers, Holy Laughter, 15.

The same forces that exorcised humor from the church formed a similar lens through which humor was systematically screened from scriptural interpretation. For most of Christian history, the Bible has been perceived as the unerring, God-inspired record of holy events. As such, it was to be read literally, never questioned or critically engaged.⁸⁶ Consequently, most readers came to the text believing that humor had no place in the scriptures and that it would be inappropriate or even disrespectful to interpret them in that manner. Thus, according to J. William Whedbee in The Bible and the Comic Vision, “centuries of liturgical and theological use of the Bible have helped to obscure and largely exclude a vital role for comedy and humor in biblical literature and religion.”⁸⁷

It is not hard to understand, then, that comedy and the Bible seem for many a contradiction in terms. On its face, the Bible records such themes as the fall and human redemption, sin and death, sacrifice and suffering—none of which makes the comic top ten. However, when a text is examined from a broader perspective, one that includes a contextual and social analysis, our interpretations may differ or broaden, as “[m]eaning inevitably derives from the general social system of the speakers of a language. This is why what one says and what one means to say can often be quite different, especially for persons not sharing the same social system.”⁸⁸ For example, if a Steve Martin video were placed into a time capsule and opened two thousand years later, wearing an arrow through one’s head might be interpreted as a sign of the “war-like” culture of the twentieth century.

⁸⁶ Please note, however, that the same civilization that wrote the Bible thought the world was flat.

⁸⁷ J. William Whedbee, The Bible and the Comic Vision (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 2.

⁸⁸ Bruce J. Malina, The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 2.

Recent biblical criticism has attempted to break through social and cultural interpretational blocks through identifying the social context of the writer and the reader. Tools such as reader-centered criticism, historical criticism, textual criticism, and form-based criticism have allowed for a new range of scriptural interpretations, ones that not only examine the social world of the original text, but also reveal the reader's social world, including preconceived biases and interpretive agendas. These interpretive tools have enabled scholars to begin to see biblical texts in an entirely fresh way, one which embraces the variety of literary genres found within the Bible, including the genre of comedy.⁸⁹

This section will attempt to highlight some of the new biblical interpretations involving humor. It is not intended to convince the reader that the Bible is a humorous text or even that it is conclusively funny. Rather, it is intended to invite consideration, based on recent biblical scholarship, of the possibility of the presence of humor within holy texts.

At the most basic level, scholars have identified classical comedic structures within biblical texts.⁹⁰ Classical comedy follows a “U-shaped plot, with action sinking into deep and often potentially tragic complications, and then suddenly turning upward into a happy ending...Thus comedy contains a ‘U’ in contrast to tragedy’s inverted ‘U.’”⁹¹ Whedbee explores the comic structure within various books of the Hebrew Bible, including Genesis, Exodus, Esther, and Job, noting that in the book of Job, for example, the text is framed by a parallel prologue and an epilogue that forms its U-shaped comedic

⁸⁹ John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987).

⁹⁰ Some scholars have noted the influence of classical Greek thought, including the Greek comedies, on scripture. This is especially true with the Gospels, such as in the Gospel of John. R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983), 140.

⁹¹ Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 7.

structure: “By retaining the restoration scene in the epilogue, the poet suddenly shifts the direction of the whole poem and returns to the prologue’s vision of the idyllic society...there is a restoration of the hero’s fortunes, which resemble formally at least the traditional upturn, found in the happy ending of comedy.”⁹² Other works noting comedic structures within scripture include David Robertson’s analysis of Exodus 1-15 as comedy over and against Euripides’ tragedy *The Bacchae*⁹³ and Phyllis Tribble’s analysis of the comedic structure in the story of Ruth and Naomi.⁹⁴

More overt examples of humor in scripture are found in the use of specific comic devices, such as reversal, wordplay, exaggeration, irony, and surprise. For example, it doesn’t take an academic treatise to explain the presence of comic reversal in the laughter of Sarah and Abraham. Both octogenarians plus, God tells Abraham that his wife will conceive. Sarah, listening through the tent, laughs and says, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”⁹⁵ The story continues with several excellent examples of wordplay. In chapter 21, verse 2, Sarah bears a son, who is to be named “Isaac,” or “laughter” in Hebrew.⁹⁶ Verse 6 builds on the Isaac wordplay when Sarah says, “God has brought *laughter* for me; everyone who hears will *laugh* with me.”

Reversal is similarly common in the Gospels. Indeed, the basic teachings of Jesus are fundamentally a reversal of established norms. Jesus tells us in Luke that the least among all of you is the greatest (Luke 9:48) and that the kingdom of God belongs to the

⁹² Ibid., 226, 230.

⁹³ David Robertson, *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 16-32.

⁹⁴ Phyllis Tribble, *God and The Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 195.

⁹⁵ Genesis 18:12; Additional wordplay can be seen in Sarah’s question about receiving pleasure, for it is unclear whether Sarah is laughing about conceiving a baby in her old age or Abraham’s inability to give her pleasure at his.

⁹⁶ Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 76.

little children (Luke 18:16-17). Similarly, Jesus sits at a banquet table with only tax collectors and sinners—those excluded by other religious leaders (Matthew 9:10).

Jesus also utilizes the comic tool of exaggeration. In Luke 18:25, Jesus warns that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus could have simply said that the rich do not understand the Kingdom of God, or that money will not buy you into heaven. Instead, he chooses this exaggerated image of a huge, lumpy, lanky animal (one quite familiar to his audience) trying to squeeze through the eye of a tiny needle.⁹⁷

In his book Dark Interval, John Dominic Crossan offers an extensive analysis of humor in the Gospel parables. For instance, he discusses the irony in Jesus' choice to compare the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. He notes that the biblical tradition with which Jesus was probably familiar was that of Ezekiel and Daniel, which upheld the great cedar of Lebanon in imperial and messianic imagery. (Ezekiel 17:22-23, 21:2-6; Daniel 4:10-12). In the face of such familiar tradition, however, Jesus chose a much humbler image of the kingdom: a mustard seed. Crossan notes the humor in this choice as “a deliberate lampoon on the cedar’s pretentiousness.”⁹⁸ Doug Adams adds an additional perspective of humor in the parable, noting that a “mustard shrub was considered obnoxious by farmers, for its seeds attracted the birds, who then also devoured the seeds farmers had planted for their crops.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Trueblood, The Humor of Christ, 47-48; See also Matthew 23:24 where Jesus admonishes the Pharisees about their emphasis on law versus justice and mercy. “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat, yet swallow a camel!” It is hard to imagine that the image of large, furry, padded feet slipping down the throat of a startled Pharisee did not evoke a smile or two from Jesus’ crowd.

⁹⁸ John Dominic Crossan, The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Play (Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications, 1975), 93-95.

⁹⁹ Doug Adams, The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 26; Consider also Matthew 13:33, where Jesus says that the Kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman mixes with flour until all of it is leavened. For much of

Use of surprise or the ridiculous for comic relief was common by biblical writers. As Frederick Buechner notes in Telling The Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale, “The comic is the unforeseeable...Who could have predicted that God would choose not Esau, the honest and reliable, but Jacob, the trickster and heel, that he would put the finger on Noah, who hit the bottle...or on the prophets, who were a ragged lot, mad as hatters, most of them.”¹⁰⁰ The book of First Samuel, for example, tells the story of the Philistines, who had stolen the ark in a battle with the Israelites. In retribution, the Lord struck the Philistines with hemorrhoids: “The hand of the Lord came against the city, causing great panic. He struck the people of the city, young and old, so that hemorrhoids broke out among them” (I Samuel 5:9, The Jewish Bible, Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures). The story goes on to explain that in punishment, the Philistines were forced to make “five golden hemorrhoids...corresponding to the number of lords of the Philistines.” (I Samuel 6:5, Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures).

Walter Wink offers another example of surprise in his fascinating exegesis of Matthew 5:40. In this text, Jesus warns, “if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” Most of the poor in first century Palestine wore only two garments: an outer garment or coat and an inner garment or cloak. Playing on the image of debtor’s court, a familiar and sore subject for much of his audience, Jesus says if you are sued for your coat, give all your clothes to the creditor. In short, get naked in the courtroom. These words were particularly sarcastic given that nakedness was taboo in

Jesus’ audience, the bread symbolizing the kingdom of heaven was that of the Seder, or unleavened bread: “One would spend the month before the Passover sweeping out the house symbolically and literally to get rid of any leaven. In the popular mind, yeast—or leaven—had become a symbol of the polluted or immoral life...For Jesus to say the kingdom of heaven is like yeast is to say it is like an immoral thing.” Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁰ Frederick Buechner, Telling The Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977), 57-58.

Judaism, with shame falling on the person viewing or causing the nakedness, not the naked party. Wink explains:

Put yourself in the debtor's place, and imagine the chuckles this saying must have evoked. There stands the creditor, beet-red with embarrassment, your outer garment in [his] one hand, your underwear in the other. You have suddenly turned the tables on him...you have refused to be humiliated, and at the same time you have registered a stunning protest against a system that spawns such debt...As you parade into the street, your friends and neighbors, startled, aghast, inquire what happened. You explain. They join your growing procession, which now resembles a victory parade. The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked...Jesus in effect is sponsoring clowning.¹⁰¹

Finally, it is interesting to consider the question of whether Jesus laughed. While biblical scriptures do not give us answers, it is hard to image that he did not. This is a man who shed tears, showed blazing anger, ate with “sinners,” was called a glutton, made up nicknames for his disciples like the Sons of Thunder, told pithy and clever parables about swallowing camels, and chose to create jugs of wine as his first miracle! Many artists believe he laughed, as there are numerous drawings and sculptures of the laughing Christ.¹⁰² Elton Trueblood ultimately concluded that “[t]he widespread failure to recognize and to appreciate the humor of Christ is one of the most amazing aspects of the era named for him.”¹⁰³

Whether it is through the laughter of the Christ, or the comedic devices found in the parables or the Pentateuch, humor is a critical key to understanding biblical texts.

Frederick Buechner shares this perspective through his view of humor and the Gospels:

Is it possible, I wonder, to say that it is only when you hear the Gospel as a wild and marvelous joke that you really hear it at all?

¹⁰¹ Walter Wink, *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987), 18-19.

¹⁰² Cal Samra, *The Joyful Christ* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 172-174.

¹⁰³ Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 15.

Heard as anything else, the Gospel is the church's thing, the preacher's thing, the lecturer's thing. Heard as a joke—high and unbidden and ringing with laughter—it can only be God's thing.¹⁰⁴

III. THE POWER IN UNITING HUMOR AND THE SACRED

“Life is serious all the time, but living cannot be. You may have all the solemnity you wish in your neckties, but in anything important (such as sex, death, and religion), you must have mirth or you will have madness.”

-G.K. Chesterton

Chapter three of this thesis explores the power in uniting humor and the sacred. The discussion will be framed by one of the most quoted statements on the subject by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. In his essay “Humour and Faith,” Niebuhr argued that humor is appropriate only to address the immediate, daily incongruities of existence. However, “[f]aith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, while humor is a “prelude to faith,” it has no place in the realm of the holy:

Insofar as the sense of humour is a recognition of incongruity, it is more profound than any philosophy which seeks to devour incongruity in reason. But the sense of humour remains healthy only when it deals with immediate issues and faces the obvious and surface irrationalities. It must move toward faith or sink into despair when the ultimate issues are raised. *That is why there is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer, and no laughter in the holy of holies (emphasis mine).*¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 68.

¹⁰⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 135.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 148-149; Niebuhr begins the essay with similar words: “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 by prayer and humour is fulfilled by faith.” *Ibid.*, 135.

Notwithstanding the fact that I am writing this thesis for Niebuhr's alma mater and live on Reinhold Niebuhr Place, I most humbly disagree with his statement. I do agree that humor, without grounding in faith, can lapse into despair. However, there is a corollary to this premise that Niebuhr does not discuss: faith needs humor as much as humor needs faith. Indeed, they share a symbiotic relationship. The theologian Conrad Hyers explains:

Laughter and humor, at first sight, seem quite out of place, and their object seems simply that of profaning the sacred or dissolving faith. Especially when the sacred is defined as the sphere of ultimate concerns and fundamental values, any introduction of the comic appears to be reducible to a failure to take sacred matters seriously, if not an outright rejection of their sacrality...Yet something is missing in this view, apart from which faith is easy prey to fanaticism, sacred images and forms become idols, and promised salvation becomes spiritual bondage...Religious history is littered with reminders of the tragic possibilities [that]...*faith without laughter leads to dogmatism and self-righteousness [and] [l]aughter without faith leads to cynicism and despair* (emphasis mine).¹⁰⁷

This chapter of the thesis will address the appropriateness and need for humor within the hallowed halls of which Niebuhr speaks. I will address, in turn, laughter in the vestibule, laughter in the sanctuary, and laughter in the holy of holies.

A. LAUGHTER IN THE VESTIBULE

Niebuhr begins with an affirmative statement that “laughter is in the vestibule of the temple.” While I agree with this initial statement, I want to clarify a point regarding

¹⁰⁷ M. Conrad Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 126-7; For a thorough discussion of other theologians who have addressed Niebuhr's quote, see Joseph Webb, *Comedy in Preaching* (Missouri: Chalice Press, 1998), 6-13.

cosmology. Niebuhr's words appear to envision the vestibule as anything "outside" the temple—the world at large or the profane. I would like to invite a broader understanding of "vestibule," one which contemplates the world, like the temple and the holy of holies, to be sacred space.

In Beyond the Shattered Image, John Chryssavgis draws a parallel between the vestibule or the material world and the sacred by envisioning the world as sacrament. He argues that we have been conditioned in far too "narrow and reductionist" a manner regarding the sacraments and redefines them as a "symbol or image that brings together two realities...a re-relating, a re-binding, whose purpose is to put back together again, to heal the wounds of separation."¹⁰⁸ He goes on to discuss icons in a similar fashion as a link between the material and the spiritual: "[S]ince it is through matter that God worked out our salvation, there is an appropriate honor due to material things."¹⁰⁹ The entire world, then, may be seen as an icon—as a point of mediation with the divine. In this way, "[t]he very earth that we tread becomes an icon, revealing God to us and indicating the way for us to God. Nothing whatsoever is neutral; nothing created lacks sacredness; no land is terra incognita."¹¹⁰

This is particularly powerful when we realize that for most of us, the weekly ratio of hours spent in the world versus the church is about 167:1. We live our faith in the vestibule, and it is a difficult journey. For example, we are expected as human beings to follow a divine standard. We are also asked to endure suffering without losing our faith. Within the sacred space of the vestibule, laughter can be one of the most powerful tools for our journey.

¹⁰⁸ John Chryssavgis, Beyond The Shattered Image (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing, 1999), 44.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

As human beings, we must follow a divine example. Love your neighbor? Well, what if your neighbor is a telemarketer? The difficulty in following this, one of the greatest commandments, comes in our view of others as separate. It is easy to condemn and judge those we perceive as different from ourselves.¹¹¹ As a nation that prides itself on individualism and the pioneering spirit, Americans are particularly susceptible to this bias. This disconnect is further compounded by our new virtual society in which human connections are formed through electronic transmissions rather than handshakes. We must build a bridge of familiarity with those whom we deem strangers if we are to live the commandments of our faith truly. As W.H. Auden said, “You shall love your crooked neighbor, with your crooked heart.”¹¹²

Humor is the major support span of this bridge. Laughter fosters humility through perspective. It enables us to see our commonalities and, in turn, appreciate our diversity. As Bastien explains, “Laughter brings people together and dissolves differences—and hatreds...[it creates] a commonality among the participants.”¹¹³ When we laugh with someone, whether it is a stranger, a friend, a lover, or an enemy, our worlds overlap for a tiny but significant moment, and in that moment, defenses are lowered, ideas and feelings are shared, and the best in each other gleams forth. Peter Berger elaborates:

The Christian faith bids us love our enemies. We would suggest that an essential part of this humanly unthinkable undertaking is to view these enemies under the aspect of the comic. In other words, the humanizing perspective of the Christian faith takes the enemy less seriously than he takes himself, addresses him as a human being instead of as the representative of awesome social forces, and

¹¹¹ Consider, for example, the relative nature of the definition of “collateral damage” in times of war.

¹¹² W. H. Auden, “As I Walked Out One Evening,” in *Auden: Poems*, Edward Mendelson, ed., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 39.

¹¹³ Bastien, “Humor and Satire,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 529.

thus may unexpectedly open the way for simple human communications.¹¹⁴

Today, terrorism, violence, and war all stem from deep canyons of separation which divide cultures, nations, and even families. Only when we get past ourselves, when we can laugh past our perceived superiority and righteousness, can we truly look at our neighbor with a sense of hospitality and justice. Only then can we look at our neighbor as Jesus looked at his. In the words of A. Roy Eckardt, “[i]n the depths of authentic humor, everyone stands forgiven. That’s what humor comes down to really: forgiveness.”¹¹⁵

It is also in the vestibule that we see humor’s unique power to address the ultimate incongruities of life, such as suffering and even death. To endure suffering without losing our faith is perhaps the most critical and difficult of all human tasks.¹¹⁶ Niebuhr argues that “if laughter seeks to deal with the ultimate issues of life, it turns into a bitter humour...our laughter becomes an expression of our sense of the meaninglessness of life.”¹¹⁷ Granted, laughter may not be possible in times of emotional shock. It is not even the ultimate cure. However, when the shock wears off, we face the daunting task of healing, and it is here that laughter is uniquely empowered to help. Indeed, laughter may be our only means of hope.

¹¹⁴ Peter Berger, “Christian Faith and the Social Comedy,” in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 130.

¹¹⁵ A. Roy Eckardt, “Divine Incongruity: Comedy and Tragedy in a Post-Holocaust World,” *Theology Today*, January 1992, 399. Also relevant is Conrad Hyers’ comment: “It is difficult to imagine anyone with a profound sense of humor in relation to his own most ultimate convictions participating in the burning of another at the stake because he failed to subscribe to a certain formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, or engaging in violent acts of aggression in order to convert others to one’s own ideological persuasions.” Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 14, n. 6.

¹¹⁶ Illustrative of this statement are statistics gathered following the Oklahoma City terrorist attack which showed that within three years of the attack, over 30% of local clergy had left their vocation. Press Release from New York Disaster Recovery Interfaith Task Force, issued 10 December 2002.

¹¹⁷ Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 137.

We laugh to gain perspective. Charlie Chaplin may have put it best when he said, “life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in longshot.”¹¹⁸ As a form of emotional catharsis, laughter allows us to detach from suffering and transcend our present trouble. Ironically, gaining perspective can mean letting go of perspective. If we insist on explanations—justifications for the existence of suffering—we will live our lives at best in a frustrated fog, or worse in bitterness and despair. Humor empowers the necessary leap of faith that allows us to transcend the need for answers. As the French dramatist Eugène Ionesco wrote, “The comic alone is able to give us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence.”¹¹⁹

We laugh at tragedy so that it does not define us. Laughter reminds us of our capacity to feel joy amid suffering. It is also a way to avoid spiritual death. In Laughter in Hell, Steve Lipman discusses how imprisoned Jews in the Holocaust used humor for empowerment and emotional survival. He describes humor during the Holocaust as a “form of spiritual resistance among the oppressed.”¹²⁰ Among many examples is one survivor’s description of staging vaudeville-type shows in Auschwitz: “In spite of all our agony and pain we never lost our ability to laugh at ourselves and our miserable situation. We had to make jokes to survive and save ourselves from deep depression. We mimicked top overseers and I did impersonations about camp life and somebody did a little tapdance, different funny, crazy things.”¹²¹

We also laugh in order to cry. Tears are a balm for healing, although as adults, we learn to hide them. Many times, it is only laughter that allows us to access those deep

¹¹⁸ Klein, The Courage to Laugh, 17.

¹¹⁹ Bastien, “Humor and Satire,” Encyclopedia of Religion, 530.

¹²⁰ Steve Lipman: Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1991), 11.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 10; Consider also the Broadway show “The Producers.”

places of pain. As Cox explains, “[s]ome who cannot say a prayer may still be able to dance it. People who cannot hope may be able to laugh.”¹²²

In the weeks following 9/11, a standup comedian named Reno bravely opened a comedy show off-Broadway. The show, “Rebel without a Pause,” was framed around her experiences on the morning of 9/11. Heralded an instant hit, her comedy provided a safe space for the audience to experience their grief as well as laugh at their common experiences from that traumatic day. Noting the designer luggage carried by her escaping neighbors and their clear status as “first time runners,” Reno dubbed her community “nouvelle refugees from Tribecastan.” She went on to inquire, “Where was the emergency broadcast system that day?” or “Why was the National Guard wearing *jungle* camouflage in Manhattan?” Her material walked the audience, many of whom had lost loved ones in the attack, through the trauma of 9/11, evoking laughter, then tears, then more laughter, and finally hope. *The New York Times* said, “the audience reaction was the laughter of much needed relief...now we can laugh with a heavy underlying sadness.”¹²³

Uniting faith and humor in the vestibule creates a powerful coping mechanism that enables us to not only live our faith, but also to embrace it in the face of unexplained suffering. Ultimately, humor may be our means of finding hope:

Laughter is hope’s last weapon...In the presence of disaster and death we laugh instead of crossing ourselves. Or perhaps better stated, our laughter is our way of crossing ourselves. It shows that despite the disappearance of any empirical basis for hope, we have not stopped hoping.¹²⁴

¹²² Cox, *Feast of Fools*, 54.

¹²³ Anita Gates, “Finding Tragic Humor Eight Months Later,” *The New York Times*, May 2002; www.citizenreno.com/press.html.

¹²⁴ Cox, *Feast of Fools*, 157.

B. LAUGHTER IN THE SANCTUARY

Niebuhr next says that there is only “the echo of laughter in the temple itself.” While I would argue that laughter’s full ring should be welcomed into the sanctuary, it appears that the church sides with Niebuhr. Short of a quip or joke at the beginning of a sermon, the echoes of laughter are the only things heard in most mainline Protestant sanctuaries.

Certainly, a story that evokes laughter is a start, but humor and laughter have much more to offer than a simple smile during a sermon. For example, laughter encourages spontaneity, which can refresh dull, dispassionate rituals. Laughter is also the language of clowning, which may jar us from the realms of self-righteousness and bring us vision. Finally, when viewed through the lens of festival, laughter and humor ground us as believers and create a safe environment in which our deepest emotional yearnings can be shared.

Recovering laughter’s full ring in the sanctuary is not that daunting of a task. If the church is a human institution, and humor and laughter are essential elements of humanity, then we should not have to look too far to find humor in the church. It simply requires embracing and building upon what is already there. Our task is only a matter of looking in the right place...

...enter majestic organ music...

The service begins. A sense of grandeur and otherworldliness settles over the congregation. Pastoral, bucolic music wafts through the pristine sanctuary filled with glittering gold, towering stained glass, and well-adorned guests. Suddenly, a squeal of unconfined laughter pierces the holiness. A tiny child has spotted the furry pink Hippo dangling above her head in her stroller and exploded with glee. Heads turn. Scowls emerge. What doth dare interrupt the solemnity of worship?

Laughter rings in the sanctuary through the playful, spontaneous expressions of a little child. Children bring a wide-eyed freshness to the world. They encounter everything as novel, exciting, and unspoiled. Most importantly, they share their emotions without hesitation or shame. Imagine incorporating such a paradigm into worship. Consider how it would transform the ways in which we offer the message and the ways in which it is received.

First, the spontaneity of humor could encourage a fresh presentation of liturgy, as it would allow worship to become a conversation rather than a monologue. Stand-up comedy offers an interesting model. While much of stand-up centers on monologues, many of the best performances are presented in conversation with the audience. As Jay Sankey notes in Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy, “Few things bind the comic and the crowd more closely than the funny things they find together.”¹²⁵

It comes down to simple listening on the part of the comedian. If the audience is not laughing, something has to change. Some comedians may change their material mid-performance to fit the audience better. Other may use “spritzing,” where they stop their monologue, engage the audience, and attempt to build rapport: “So, ah, where are you from?” [*audience member*: “Boise”] “Oh, I’m so sorry.” Comedians must determine

¹²⁵ Jay Sankey, Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy (New York: Routledge, 1998), 159.

how to communicate with each particular audience. Sankey describes the process as follows:

The performer is forever encouraging and nurturing. If the performer is too controlling and the connection becomes inflexible or brittle, it may well snap, and the audience will be lost. And if the performer is too casual, failing to assert himself and expend a concentrated energy, even an initially 'caught' audience may grow distant from him and eventually get away. As with all things, success lies in a sensitive responsive balance.¹²⁶

The most meaningful liturgy, like comedy, is that which dances and plays with the audience. If the needs of the congregation are not being met by the liturgy (like the comedy club audience that is not laughing), something must change. Each congregation is a unique living organism, its persona dictated by such things as the personalities attending, their experiences during the week, the weather, or their lack of coffee before the service. To connect with the audience, liturgy must be a balance of words and listening.¹²⁷

The spontaneity of laughter can bring freshness not only to the presentation, but also to the message itself. For example, our repeated encounters with scripture can easily become stale and one-dimensional, as “[y]ears of conditioning have rendered the scriptures as predictable and innocuous stories in which serious people speak in a language filled with moralisms and legalisms, lacking fun and surprise.”¹²⁸ Alternatively, the Gospel message is anything but one-dimensional. Its stories invoke all the senses: tasting bread, washing feet, touching a cloak, smelling perfume. Its words

¹²⁶ Ibid., 152.

¹²⁷ There are numerous ways this may be accomplished. One might consider an improvisational sermon, where a theme or teaching idea is offered and then explored through an informal sharing of experiences by the members of the congregation. If there are puzzled faces during a homily, stop and ask questions. If a child squeals with laughter in the middle of the prayer, say a prayer in thanks for children, or better yet, thank the child for his or her prayer. It is the energy of the community that best drives liturgy.

¹²⁸ Donnelly, “Divine Folly,” *Theology Today*, 388.

invite participation and engagement. One such invitation is through humor which juxtaposes incongruent images and creates surprise through pairing unrelated ideas.

What if the story of the paralytic lowered into Jesus' presence through a hole in the roof were told from the perspective of the homeowner? ("Hey, who's paying for the roof?") How would the whale tell Jonah's story? What ever happened to Zacchaeus after the Sycamore? Did Mary and Elizabeth enjoy Lamaze class? If Levi's dinner table were set in the twentieth century, might Jesus have had dinner with an IRS agent and Heidi Fleiss? A playful interaction with scripture demonstrates a desire to engage, explore, and honor it.

Humor's spontaneity also allows the recipients of the message to experience liturgy in a fresh way. In our information-driven society, we have lost much of our ability to perceive and experience. In short, we have become too dependent on outside interpretation. As Donnelley puts it, "We see with each others' eyes and smell with others' noses."¹²⁹ Spontaneity empowers a more independent sense of experience. In Improvisation for the Theater, Viola Spolin explains that "[t]hrough spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings."¹³⁰ For example, even something as simple as a religious joke can free us to experiment and feel before we process cognitively. Graeme Garrett suggests that "[a] religious joke that generates a laugh is touching something in the human appreciation of the sacred. It invites thought.

¹²⁹ Viola Spolin, Improvisation for the Theater (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 7.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

And it might, like the iron in the fire, just disturb things long enough to get a blaze going again.”¹³¹

This is especially important in terms of ritual. Consider the rote repetition with which we engage rituals such as Communion, the Apostles’ Creed, or the Lord’s Prayer. The problem, as Cox notes, is that “as rituals are laden first with myths and then with doctrines, they grow less flexible. Gestures stagger under the weight of the explicit meanings we load onto them. Emotions well up that cannot be expressed within them.”¹³² Cox continues, “Humor allows people the freedom to bring their own life experiences into dialogue with ritual and to give independent and personal meaning to worship—a formal structure within which freedom and fantasy can twist and tumble.”¹³³

One such example is found in St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. There, liturgy is framed around participatory worship involving movement, singing, line-dancing, and bonding. As Rector Donald Schell explains, “the church’s worship practices are aimed at taking people out of the constraints of having to be a certain way in church. They move people into a much more spontaneous, direct, immediate engagement with each other and with the word and sacrament.”¹³⁴ The service honors and utilizes the unique energy generated by those individuals gathered for worship. Another Rector comments, “I’ve seen what can happen for people who are gathered together and making something holy of whatever anyone present has to offer.

¹³¹ Graeme Garrett, *God Matters: Conversations in Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 28.

¹³² Cox, *Feast of Fools*, 73.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹³⁴ Trudy Bush, “Back to the Future: Fourth-Century Style Reaches Bay Area Seekers,” *The Christian Century*, 20 November-3 December 2002, 20.

I've seen how transforming it is for people's lives and how it opens them to an experience of God."¹³⁵

The squeals of a child's laughter carry with them a wisdom that can transform worship and ritual. We must honor not only its echo, but its full ring within the sanctuary.

...more majestic organ music...

The service continues. We are treated to a perfectly crafted homiletic message, complete with timeless wisdom from Saint Augustine and Karl Barth. The prayers are sublime. The communion is exactly executed and flawless. Flawless...until a wafer is dropped on the floor. A gasp and then silence. The body of Christ on the floor! The same floor walked on by Sketchers and Naots and Jimmy Choos that have trudged through the common city streets! Alas, the profane and the sacred have met. There is only one recourse: send in the clowns.

Granted, the figure of Bozo is not commonly associated with high church where tall hats and holy smoke rule the day, but notwithstanding the carefully applied layers of liturgical polish and gloss, our humanity will always break through the ritual. And the comic archetype of the sacred clown will gladly usher it in.

The word "clown" comes from the Celtic: "Originally, it designated a farm worker, a boor who seemed funny to townspeople, a lumpish amusing fellow, a

¹³⁵ Ibid., 19. Consider also the use of secular symbols. One such example is Theology on Tap, a young adult program sponsored by the Catholic Church. The program is held in local taverns where young people normally gather on a Friday or Saturday nights. Rather than impose its unfamiliar and, for some, ineffective religious rituals, the church reaches out through secular symbols and rituals their audience finds comforting. National Public Radio broadcast, December 8, 2002, "Faith on Tap;" Information is also available through www.yam.org/yam.cgi/programs/tot/.

fool....the clown presents the opposite of well-ordered ego functioning. He fails, he is weak, he is pitiable. He is anything but master of the situation.”¹³⁶

Clowns are honored as sacred by many cultures.¹³⁷ One such archetype is found in Zen Buddhism, which honors laughter as a means to enlightenment. As Hyers notes in The Laughing Buddha: Zen and the Comic Spirit, “Laughter mocks grasping and clinging, and cools desire. It cuts through ignorance and precipitates insight...The whole intellectual and valuational structure of the discriminating mind is challenged, with a result that is enlightening and liberating.”¹³⁸ In Zen, laughter and clown figures are commonplace. One of the most famous is Hotei, a big-bellied, eccentric monk who is said to have wandered through the land during the tenth century with a cloth bag over his shoulder (thus his Chinese name Hotei or “cloth bag”). According to legend, he never spoke, but only giggled and cackled.¹³⁹ He refused monastic life, and his religious life consisted simply of playing with the village children, “as if even children and fools knew what priests and monks did not.”¹⁴⁰

Another example of the clown archetype is found in the Native American tradition, where sacred clowns are integral to religious ceremonies. These clowns, through their buffoonery and comedy, are able to break open old ways of seeing and offer new ways of communicating. For example, in the Night Chant ceremony, the Navaho use a sacred clown to impersonate and lampoon the Gods. While members of the tribe, dressed as various deities, engage in an intricate and formal dance ritual, the Water God,

¹³⁶ Ann Ulanov and Barry Ulanov, The Witch and the Clown: Two Archetypes of Human Sexuality (Wilmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications, 1987), 186.

¹³⁷ One study of 136 cultures showed that 56 had specific comedic elements in their religious ceremonies. Bastien, “Humor and Satire,” Encyclopedia of Religion, 528.

¹³⁸ Conrad Hyers, The Laughing Buddha: Zen and the Comic Spirit (Durango, CO: Longwood Academic, 1973), 17.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

represented by a clown dressed in ragged clothes, mimics the entire proceeding. He stumbles, falls, exaggerates the movement and gestures of the others, and runs into the audience performing pranks and taunts. The clowns ask the questions that others would like to ask. They say the things others may be afraid to speak. Here, “[t]he dialectic of holiness and humor, of sacred ceremony and profane comedy, is openly enacted.”¹⁴¹

Lilly Tomlin offers a unique variation on the sacred clown in the play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*. One of the characters played by Tomlin is Trudy the bag lady, a cross between the Proverbs wisdom figure and a street sage.¹⁴² Trudy is a vagabond who wanders New York City, hosting an on-going intergalactic dialogue with her “space chums” from some unknown planet. She explains, “[my space chums say], ‘Trudy, we see now, intelligence is just the tip of the iceberg. The more you know, the less knowing the *meaning* of things means. So, *forget* the meaning of life.’ I didn’t tell them, of course, I had.”¹⁴³ While some may think her crazy, Trudy is, in fact, another sacred clown whose unorthodox conduct shakes us from our predictable views and makes us wonder:

[Trudy] is a bold, unself-conscious unsettler of our deepest-dyed habits of thinking, and her not-so-secret agenda is to return us to a fertile place beyond our conventional wisdom...toward a wisdom beyond wisdom, a holy awe before the universe and an acceptance of everything, including our failure to understand.¹⁴⁴

If invited, sacred clowns can deeply enrich our worship experience. First, they can remind us not to worship the ritual itself. There is always the danger that we become more focused on the ritual and its accoutrements than the ultimate purpose of the ritual.

¹⁴¹ Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 17.

¹⁴² See female personified wisdom figure in Proverbs 1:20ff.

¹⁴³ Jon Spayde, “Trudy: Lily Tomlin’s Bag Lady for the Ages,” *Utne Reader*, May-June 2002, 68.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

As in the Night Chant ceremony, the clown gives us permission to see the humor and our humanity in the ritual—in the mispronounced words, in the errors in the Sunday bulletin, even in our communion wafer dropped on the floor. Indeed, the clown would probably pick the wafer off the floor, blow the dust off, kiss it, and place it back in the plate.¹⁴⁵

The clown destroys our idols by laughing at them:

The fool makes us laugh even at our most sacred notions and beliefs, thus leaving open a space for us in which something beyond our ego-constructions can enter...the clown pokes holes in our universes of meaning. By means of these holes a larger sun may shine through, visions of larger galaxies may be glimpsed. In the true meaning of a sense of humor, a clown may restore our sense of proportion.¹⁴⁶

On a broader level, the clown embodies the Gospel message.¹⁴⁷ As an example of humility, the clown upholds the reversal of worldly values and moves us to question what is unjust. Hyers contends that “[t]he clown-figure challenges all those hierarchies that elevate one person above another and those dualities that separate one person from another. The exalted is humbled, and the humbled is exalted; opposites are united and distances are softened.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Such is the experience offered by Dzieci, an international experimental theater ensemble dedicated to the search for the “sacred” through the medium of theater. In one of their productions, *The Fools Mass*, the group portrays medieval village idiots who are forced to enact their own mass after the death of their beloved pastor from the plague. The mass, full of buffoonery and comic audience participation, strips away guile and pretense, leaving nothing but the deep humanity and humility of the simple, intimate gathering. (Performed at Union Theological Seminary, December 12, 2002). Additional information is available through: <http://www.dzieci.mindspring.com>.

¹⁴⁶ Ulanov, *The Witch and the Clown*, 204.

¹⁴⁷ The sacred clown is also seen as a prototype of the Christ. Stewart, *Jesus The Holy Fool*; Cox, *Feast of Fools*, 139-157; Victoria L. Moss, “Clowning Around,” *Re-Imagining*, August 1999, 4. Consider *The Parable*, a movie produced by the Protestant Church in 1966 for the New York World’s Fair. In the movie, the story of Jesus was told through the life of a clown who changes the lives of the people in his circus through his selfless acts and eventual death. The movie addressed the sentiments for many disillusioned people: “Christ ha[d] come to symbolize a comic hope of dealing with the violence of starvation, poverty, and warfare.” Bastien, “Humor and Satire,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 528.

¹⁴⁸ Hyers, *The Laughing Buddha*, 43; A classic example of inversion of the social order by clowns is Charlie Chaplin’s comic portrayal of Hitler in *The Great Dictator*: “Chaplin held up a fun-house mirror, distorting the image of Adolf Hitler into a grotesquerie. He separated the comic parts of Hitler from the serious, and caricatured the former for greater effect. After Chaplin showed that separation to

The clown will highlight, if not shove, incongruities of faith in our face. For example, words of prayer for the “less fortunate” that are issued from an opulent and privileged pulpit might be interrupted by the clown’s own prayer: picking up the pulpit, carrying it out the sanctuary doors, and selling it for hot soup and bread.

The clown never allows rigid dogma. Consider Conrad Hyers’ warning that faith without humor can lead to dogma and self-righteousness. Comfort in absolute dogma is the clown’s favorite playground. As Professor Joseph Webb explains, “the places where everything is clear and fixed, where the Christians are neatly separated from the non-Christians, the sheep from the goats, where the saved are weeded out from the mass of unsaved—for the comic, these are the places where one goes to work.”¹⁴⁹

Finally, the clown is the dream maker and the visionary—a creator of possibilities. Like Tomlin’s character of Trudy, the clown ushers in a sense of wonder and holy awe before the universe. Ultimately, the clown beckons us as a religious community to engage in sacred play and find that angle of repose between humor and faith.

...and still more majestic organ music...

Finally, the communion debacle eases. Several creeds sooth the battered nerves. The words of a well-worn hymn lull with their rote repetition. Then comes the passing of

audiences...Hitler would always appear in their minds’ eye as a jerk—a scary jerk, but a jerk nonetheless.” Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 267.

¹⁴⁹ Webb, *Comedy in Preaching*, 27; Humor and the ways of the clown are also parallel to the language of post-modernism. Postmodernism is a language of doubt, of relativism, of ambiguity, of the transcendent, of deconstruction and of incongruence. Similarly, humor is steeped in the spirit of postmodernism. It is filled with immanence, yet looks to the transcendent; it is comfortable with doubt and shrinks from the absolute. As a result, humor is uniquely able to speak to this post-modern generation now alienated from the church. Ibid., 21; Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996); Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2001).

the peace. People get out of their seats; voices engage; hugs and smiles are shared. There is a burst of life in the sanctuary. Then, as quickly as it began, it is snuffed out. We return to silence...and the offering.

Laughter is a part of a larger sense of festival and celebration. Unfortunately, as laughter has been shunned, so too has festivity. The Passing of the Peace is but a distant remnant of what once was a rich tradition of festival and celebration in the church. Today, “[t]he Christian church has all the language of a party, but hasn’t been able to pull it off.”¹⁵⁰

The sense of festivity is inherent to human nature. A human being “is by nature a creature who not only works and thinks, but who sings, dances, prays, tells stories and celebrates...[is] *homo festivus*...”¹⁵¹ As a human trait, a sense of festival is also inherent to worship. “When people foregather at the sanctuary, they gather together for collective rejoicing. Consecrations, sacrifices, sacred dances and contests, performances, mysteries—all are comprehended within the act of celebrating a festival.”¹⁵²

Unfortunately, Western industrial society is where festivity has reached its lowest ebb:

[W]hatever forms of festivity and fantasy remain to us are shrunken and insulated. Our celebrations do not relate us, as they once did, to the parade of cosmic history or to the great stories of man’s spiritual quest. Our fantasies tend to be cautious, eccentric and secretive...Our feasting is sporadic or obsessive, our fantasies predictable and politically impotent. Neither provides the inspiration for genuine social transformation.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Samra, *The Joyful Christ*, 46.

¹⁵¹ Cox, *Feast of Fools*, 10.

¹⁵² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 21.

¹⁵³ Cox, *Feast of Fools*, 4.

The demise of festivity in the sanctuary is critical to note for several reasons. First, festival nurtures the marking of time. Understanding our roots and our relation to the larger whole of human history grounds us in meaning and empowers our daily struggle. Cox explains:

The religious [hu]man is one who grasps his [or her] own life within a larger historical and cosmic setting...They help him place himself somewhere between Eden and the Kingdom of God; they give him a past and a future. But without real festive occasions...man's spirit as well as his psyche shrinks. He becomes something less than man, a gnat with neither origin or destiny.¹⁵⁴

Festival also gives new life to ritual. The Christian message is one of joy and good news, but if you judged it from our worship services, you might not realize it, as “[o]ur feast days have lost their vitality. Christmas is now largely a family reunion, Easter a spring style show, and on Thanksgiving there is no one to thank.”¹⁵⁵ In early medieval festivals, worshippers celebrated and expressed their human spirit through dance, song, and revelry. Today, we check our joy and our emotions at the door of the church. Only sanitized portions of our souls are allowed to emerge. This point is best illustrated in the contrast between human behavior at a sporting event and human behavior in worship. NCAA basketball spectators, for example, will freely laugh, cheer, cry, and rage. This is a one-time, two-hour “event,” the sole purpose of which is to place a small orange ball inside a suspended net. How ironic that in an ongoing spiritual “event” concerned with ultimate questions of existence, we sit silently, emoting nothing. Reclaiming festival in the sanctuary can create a free and safe environment in which our

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 14; Please note that many of the sources cited in this thesis were written prior to the standard use of inclusive language. This is ironic given that many of these writers promote laughter as the “great equalizer.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 15.

deepest emotional yearnings can be shared—a place where we can meet God “first in the dance before we can define [God] in the doctrine.”¹⁵⁶

Festivity, like the laughter of children and clowning, summons the holy within the human collective.¹⁵⁷ It is not concerned with packing the pews or filling the coffers. It simply tills the religious ground until the church becomes, once again, a fertile place for nurturing human existence—a place where our tears, our anger, and our laughter ring in celebration with our faith.

C. LAUGHTER IN THE HOLY OF HOLIES

*The man or woman who passes into the holy of holies and ceases to laugh is bringing into God’s presence a mangled creature, one who is less than the full being that God intended him [or her] to be...Why should God wish comedy to go into the deep freeze...God...is the primal humorist.*¹⁵⁸

Niebuhr’s last statement is that there is “only faith and prayer, and no laughter, in the holy of holies.” While faith and prayer are certainly to be found in the holy of holies, laughter is an essential element of each. Allowing humor into the holy of holies is not only appropriate, but also essential if we are to facilitate intimacy and honesty in our relationship with the divine.

First, humor belongs in the holy of holies. Niebuhr argues there is no laughter in the experience of divine judgment: “[I]t is a solemn experience to be judged of God and

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 28.

¹⁵⁷ Webb, *Comedy in Preaching*, 31.

¹⁵⁸ Chad Walsh, “On Being With It: An Afterwards,” reprinted in Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 244.

to stand under the scrutiny of Him from whom no secrets are hid.”¹⁵⁹ However, I would like to invite a new perspective, one in which we approach the holy of holies not in solemn shame, but in holy laughter.

We should initially note that as humans, we share the trait of laughter with the divine. Cote argues that “[o]ur laughter is but a quiver, a childlike reverberation of God’s own laughter. Ultimately, we laugh because God laughs.”¹⁶⁰ Niebuhr agrees and states, “God is not frequently thought of as possessing a sense of humour, though that quality would have to be attributed to a perfect personality.”¹⁶¹

However, not all laughter is appropriate in the holy of holies. Laughter must be subordinate to the ethical. There is no place in the sacred for comedy that merely follows the lines of power. Humor can be misused, as can sanctity. The holy of holies invites only humor that honors.

Conrad Hyers terms it “holy laughter”—a laughter that honors our faith and our flawed human efforts within it. It is a laughter that approaches the holy in seriousness and, at the same time, in jest at its inability to comprehend the holy. It is “an interlude, half-playful, half-serious, which takes place in a zone between the sacred and the profane, and which has its own validity within the religious encounter.”¹⁶² Peter Berger describes this sort of laughter as “comic catharsis”—a laughter which can give us a fleeting glimpse of our transcendence:

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

¹⁵⁹ Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” in Hyers, Holy Laughter, 142.

¹⁶⁰ Cote, Holy Mirth, 20.

¹⁶¹ Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” in Hyers, Holy Laughter, 134.

¹⁶² M. Conrad Hyers, “The Comic Profanation of Faith,” in Hyers, Holy Laughter, 23.

of the walls of our imprisonment...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.¹⁶³

A laughter that honors our faith, our humanity and ultimately our potential for transcendence is the laughter appropriate for the holy of holies. Indeed, “wherever ‘holy laughter’ takes place, there the holy of holies itself exists.”¹⁶⁴

Laughter is not only appropriate in the realm of the holy of holies; it is critical for our spiritual relationships. As we look out from the pulpit, the faces of the congregation seem to plead “Are we okay? Are we acceptable in the face of God?” How sad that there is doubt, and how sad that the church does not provide an environment that would preempt such questions before they are even formed. Laughter can facilitate this missing intimacy and honesty.

As with human relationships, intimacy with God comes only through sharing ourselves in an honest and open way. In Abba’s Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging, Brennan Manning calls it “wasting time with God.”¹⁶⁵ Prayer is one of the most intimate ways to engage in this sharing. Ann and Barry Ulanov explain the importance of a holistic approach to this type of prayer: “[A]ll members of the body need to be collected and brought into prayer. There is no love—of self, of God, of anyone—in cutting off life artificially.”¹⁶⁶ Certainly, laughter, as an integral part of our humanity, must be included. Cox contends that “[o]ur ability to laugh while praying is an

¹⁶³ Berger, “Christian Faith and the Social Comedy,” in Hyers, Holy Laughter, 128.

¹⁶⁴ Webb, Comedy in Preaching, 9.

¹⁶⁵ Brennan Manning, Abba’s Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), 55-56.

¹⁶⁶ Ann Ulanov and Barry Ulanov, Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 39.

invaluable gift. It is not understood either by the sober believers or by the even more sober atheists among us.”¹⁶⁷

We must trust that God understands and honors all the languages that our hearts speak, whether through words, tears, or laughter. David danced and sang before the Lord with all his might, with songs and lyre and harps.¹⁶⁸ Lorenzo Ghiberti prayed through gilt bronze and Frida Kahlo through her vibrant, sensual paintings. Bach reached heavenward through the notes of his cantatas, and Maya Angelou whispered her intimate secrets through poetry. Ultimately, we must trust that God hears, understands, and embraces our every cry (and every smile). As Chad Walsh suggests, in doing so, we can freely offer our gifts:

A great part of the malaise afflicting Christianity today, particularly in its Protestant forms, is that it has forgotten (or never learned) how to laugh. Like Niebuhr, it fails to realize that even (maybe especially) in the holy of holies men are set free by the ultimate presence of God, so that in that fellowship they can offer whatever gifts they come bearing, including the gift of humor.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Cox, Feast of Fools, 144.

¹⁶⁸ II Samuel 6:5

¹⁶⁹ Chad Walsh, “On Being with It: An Afterward,” in Hyers, Holy Laughter, 243.

IV. CONCLUSION (A HEAVENLY POST-SCRIPT):

Dearest readers (and all children of creation):

I hope that you have enjoyed this thesis. It's basically what I wanted. (A bit wordy, though). So, let me put it to you in brief: We need to chat.

I appreciate all of your spiritual efforts—your worship services, the flowers, the offerings. Really, I do. But something is wrong between us. Something is missing. I have sat in your houses of worship and felt, well...empty. (I've noticed some of you do too). I have listened to your prayers and thought, "Where is the fire? Where is the intimacy?" Then it dawned on me. We don't laugh together anymore.

Oh now, don't roll your eyes at the creator of the universe. Look, humor is some powerful stuff. I understand that there are days when you don't feel like laughing. I don't laugh all the time either, but it bothers me when you exclude it completely from our

relationship. It's not about the laughter per se. It's about you feeling comfortable enough, you knowing me (or maybe yourself) well enough, to laugh with me.

Now, people have portrayed me for thousands of years in every way imaginable—many times without a sense of humor. That image, however, is limited by their experience. It is certainly not all of who I am. You have to find me for yourself.

Is it that you've forgotten that we share a sense of humor? Remember the whole "made in the image of the divine" thing? Genesis? And you know that you are the only creature to laugh. (Well, there is that hyena that I made...but, let's not get sidetracked). Just consider the diversity of creation and then tell me that I don't have a sense of humor: heaven and earth, platypus and blowfish, Jerry Springer and Jerry Falwell??

Look, I'm not going to lecture, 'cause I HATE long-winded sermons. The bottom line is this: I long for a more intimate relationship with you. And we can have it. It is not one bit different than how you develop intimacy in other relationships. You listen, you share, you build trust, and you laugh. They all relate. You can't laugh if you are not listening. You can't share authentically if you hold part of yourself back as unlovable or unacceptable. Healing doesn't happen in the dark, damp recesses of your psyche. It happens when you open the doors of your soul for air. It happens when you hold your spirit up to the sunlight. I want all of you—the anger, the pain, the tears, AND the laughter. I love it all—it's all holy.

OKAY, so maybe you don't HAVE to laugh to find me. But, I tell you what...come, sit with me in a quiet place, tell me your stories, share your dreams...just laugh with me a bit. I'll take it from there.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Doug. The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 1997.
- . Humor in the American Pulpit. Austin, Texas: The Sharing Company. 1975.
- Aichele, George. Theology as Comedy: Critical and Theological Implications. Lanham, MD: University Press of America. 1980. (Acrobat Adobe Version. 2000.)
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. Rabelais and His World. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1968.
- Bastien, Joseph, "Humor and Satire," Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: McMillian. 1987.
- Beadle, Richard and Pamela M. King, eds. York Mystery Plays. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1984.
- Bergson, Henri. "Laughter." In Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher. New York: Doubleday. 1956.
- Bimler, Richard W. and Robert D. Bimler. Let There Be Laughter. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House. 1999.
- Blumenfeld, Esther and Lynne Alpern. Humor at Work. Atlanta, Georgia: Peachtree Publishers. 1994.

- Bonham, Tal D. Humor: God's Gift. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press. 1988.
- Borg, Marcus and Ross Mackenzie, eds. God at 2000. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing. 2000.
- Buechner, Frederick. Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale. San Francisco: HarperCollins. 1977.
- . Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC. San Francisco: HarperCollins. 1973.
- Jung, Carl. The Portable Jung, Joseph Campbell, ed. New York: Penguin. 1971.
- Chryssavgis, John. Beyond the Shattered Image. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light and Life Publishing. 1999.
- Clarke, Elizabeth. "Religious Jokes: Is it OK to laugh?" The Charlotte Observer. 27 July 2002. 1F.
- Cormier, Henri. The Humor of Jesus. New York: Alba House. 1977.
- Conconi, Giorgio. When Jesus Smiled. New York: Alba House. 1995.
- Conti-Entin, Carol. Improvisation and Spiritual Disciplines. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications. 1989.
- Conzelmann, H. and A. Lindemann. Interpreting the New Testament. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishing. 1988.
- Cosby, Bill. Bill Cosby is a Very Funny Fellow Right! Warner Brothers Records. 1963.
- Cote, Richard G. Holy Mirth. Whitinsville, Massachusetts: Affirmation Books. 1986.
- Cox, Harvey The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy. New York: Harper & Row. 1969.
- Crossan, John Dominic. In Parables. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press. 1992.
- . The Dark Interval. Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications. 1975.
- . Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges. New York: Harper & Row. 1976.
- Culpepper, R. Alan. Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1983.

- Dart, John. The Laughing Savior: The Discovery and Significance of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library. New York: Harper & Row. 1979.
- De Mello, Anthony. Taking Flight. New York: Doubleday. 1988.
- Donahue, John R. The Gospel in Parables. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1988.
- Donnelly, Doris. "Divine Folly: Being Religious and the Exercise of Humor." *Theology Today*. January 1992.
- Eco, Umberto. In the Name of the Rose. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1980.
- Eckardt, A. Roy. "Divine Incongruity: Comedy and Tragedy in a Post-Holocaust World." *Theology Today*. January 1992. 399.
- On The Way To Death: Essays Toward a Comic Vision. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers. 1996.
- Sitting In The Earth And Laughing: A Handbook Of Humor. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers. 1992.
- Eliade, Mircea, ed. "Humor and Satire," The Encyclopedia of Religion. Vol. 6.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. The Praise of Folly, trans. Clarence Miller. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press. 1979.
- Flinn, Lisa and Barbara Younger. Creative Ways to Offer Praise. Nashville, TN: Abbingdon Press. 1993.
- Frick, Murray. Reach the Back Row: Creative Approaches for High-Impact Preaching. Loveland Colorado: Vital Ministry Books. 1999.
- Freud, Sigmund. Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 1960.
- Funk, Robert and Roy Hoover. The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? San Francisco: HarperCollins. 1993.
- Garrett, Graeme. God Matters: Conversations in Theology. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press. 1999.
- Gilhus, Ingvild Saelid. Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion. London: Routledge. 1997.
- Grassi, Joseph A. God Makes Me Laugh: A New Approach to Luke. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier. 1986.

- Greene, Brian. The Elegant Universe. New York: Random House. 1999.
- Grenz, Stanley J. A Primer on Postmodernism. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing. 1996.
- Hample, Stuart and Eric Marshall. Children's Letters to God. New York: Workman Publishing. 1991.
- Hayes, John H. and Carl R. Holladay. Biblical Exegesis. Atlanta: John Knox Press. 1987.
- Heller, David. Dear GOD: Children's Letters to God. New York: Berkeley Publishing. 1987.
- Huizinga, Johan. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. Boston: The Beacon Press. 1950.
- Hyers, M. Conrad, ed. Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective. New York: The Seabury Press. 1969.
- , The Laughing Buddha: Zen and the Comic Spirit. Durango, CO: Longwood Academic. 1989.
- , The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers. 1966.
- Johnston, Graham. Preaching to a Postmodern World. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing. 2001.
- Jonsson, Jakob. Humour and Irony in the New Testament. Leiden: E.J. Brill. 1985.
- Kazantzakis, Nikos. Zorba the Greek. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1952.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, ed. Howard V. Hong. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1992.
- Klein, Alan. The Courage to Laugh: Humor, Hope, and Healing in the Face of Death and Dying. New York: Tarcher Putnam. 1988.
- Krueger, Derek. Symeon The Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1996.
- Kuschel, Karl-Josef. Laughter: A Theological Reflection. New York: Continuum. 1994.
- L'Engle, Madeleine. Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art. Colorado, Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press. 1972.

- Lewis, C. S. The Screwtape Letters. New York: Macmillan. 1974.
- Lipman, Steve. Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson. 1991.
- Litherland, Janet. The Clown Ministry Handbook. Colorado Springs: CO, Meriwether Publishing. 1990.
- Lorde, Audre. Sister Outsider. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press. 1984.
- Manning, Brennan. Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress. 1994.
- Malina, Bruce J. The New Testament World. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 1993.
- McMahon, Linnet. The Handbook of Play Therapy. London: Routledge. 1992.
- McManus, Erwin Raphael. An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind. Loveland, CO: Group Publishing. 2001.
- Mendelson, Edward, ed. Auden: Poems. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1991.
- Moore, Thomas. The Soul's Religion: Cultivating a Profoundly Spiritual Way of Life. New York: HarperCollins. 2002.
- Morreall, John. Comedy, Tragedy and Religion. Albany: State University of New York Press. 1999.
- Moss, Victoria L. "Clowning Around." *Re-Imagining*. August 1999. 4.
- Neilsen, Alleen Pace and Don L. F. Neilsen. Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Humor. Phoenix, Arizona: Oryx Press. 2002.
- Neyrey, Jerome H., ed. The Social World of Luke-Acts. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Press. 1991.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. "Humour and Faith," Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1946.
- Palmer, Earl F. The Humor of Jesus: Sources of Laughter in the Bible. Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing. 2001.
- Parrott, Bob W. Ontology of Humor. New York: Philosophical Library. 1982.

- Paulson, Terry L. Making Humor Work: Taking Your Job Seriously and Yourself Lightly. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications. 1989.
- Pinsky, Mark I. The Gospel According to the Simpsons. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 2001.
- Polhemus, Robert M. Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1980.
- Provine, Robert R. Laughter: A Scientific Investigation. New York: Viking Press. 2000.
- Radin, Paul. The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology. New York: Schocken Books. 1972.
- Redding, David A. Jesus Makes Me Laugh. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 1973.
- Riddell, Mike, Mark Pierson, Cathy Kirkpatrick. The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. 2001.
- Rizzuto, Ana-Maria. The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1979.
- Robertson, David. The Old Testament and the Literary Critic. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1977.
- Robinson, James M., ed. The Nag Hammadi Library. San Francisco: HarperCollins. 1978.
- Rohr, Richard. "Holy Fools: Ushers of the Next Generation in the Church." *Sojourners*. July 1994.
- Roozen, David A. "Worship and Renewal." *Christian Century*. June 5-12, 2002.
- Rudlin, John. Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook. London: Routledge. 1994.
- Samra, Cal. The Joyful Christ: The Healing Power of Humor. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 1985.
- Sanders, Barry. Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press. 1995.
- Saward, John. Perfect Fools. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1980.
- Screech, M. A. Laughter at the Foot of the Cross. London: The Penguin Press. 1997.

- Siegel, Lee. Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1987.
- Smith, William Austin. "The Uses of the Comic Spirit in Religion." *Atlantic Monthly*. Vol. CVII. 1911.
- Smollin, Anne Bryan. God Knows You're Stressed. Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books. 2001.
- Solle, Dorothee. Suffering. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.
- Spayde, Jon. "Wise Fools: A Gallery of Mad Prophets, Poets, and Pranksters." *Utne Reader*. May-June 2002.
- Spolin, Viola. Improvisation for the Theater. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 1999.
- Staguhn, Gerhard. God's Laughter: Man and His Cosmos. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 1992.
- Stewart, Elizabeth-Anne. Jesus the Holy Fool. Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward. 1999.
- Thompson, Ewa M. Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture. Lanham, New York: University Press of America. 1987.
- Trible, Phyllis. God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1978.
- Trueblood, Elton. The Humor of Christ. New York: Harper & Row. 1964.
- Turks, Paul. Philip Neri: The Fire of Joy. New York: Alba House. 1995.
- Ulanov, Ann and Barry Ulanov. Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer. Atlanta: John Knox Press. 1982.
- The Witch and the Clown: Two Archetypes of Human Sexuality. Wilmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications. 1987.
- Ulanov, Ann Bedford. The Functioning Transcendent: A Study in Analytical Psychology. Wilmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications. 1996.
- Finding Space: Winnicott, God and Psychic Reality. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press. 2001.
- Via, Dan. The Parables. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1967.

- . Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1975.
- Viladesau, Richard. Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric. New York: Paulist Press. 2000.
- Walton, Janet. Art and Worship: A Vital Connection. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press. 1988.
- . "Improvisation and Imagination: Holy Play," *Worship*. July 2001.
- Webb, Joseph M. Comedy and Preaching. Missouri: Chalice Press. 1998.
- Whedbee, J. William. The Bible and the Comic Vision. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998.
- Wink, Walter. Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers. 1987.
- Woodson, Yoko. Zen, Painting and Calligraphy: 17th-20th Centuries. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. 2001.
- Wooten, Patty, R.N. Compassionate Laughter: Jest for Your Health. Salt Lake City, Utah: Commune-a-Key Publishing. 1996.
- Young, Brad H. Jesus The Jewish Theologian. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers. 1995.