



The Laughter of God

~ what makes life so funny?

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Laughter and the Human Condition

There is a large and fascinating literature of humour and *about* humour. Study of both ancient and contemporary cultures leads to the conclusion that there is something universal and timeless about what makes people laugh. *Homo Sapiens* has been described as 'the laughing animal'. William Hazlitt (1778-1830): 'Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be.'

The attributes of human behaviour and understanding which make us laugh include senses of irrationality, inconsistency, ridiculousness, and incongruous juxtapositions. Frailty, found in all human conditions from the simpleton to the haughty is a rich seed-bed for comedy. (Were we not created to be as gods? — just look at us!) We laugh out of joy, surprise, relief and delight. But we may also laugh out of spite and to scorn and taunt. We 'laugh it off' to avoid responsibility. We need laughter to help us celebrate. Laughter is a universal social lubricant. Perhaps the mythical Eve and Adam first laughed at the incongruity within unity of the sexes. Their joke is still with us.

This essay, and the Ephesus Group *performance* that goes with it, is an attempt to consider the theological implication of the thread of laughter that runs through life. If we are 'made in the image of God', what is the nature of a divinity which gives rise to the phenomenon of humour? (And why, we might ask, do our earnest theologies give so little attention to the comic element of human experience?) In what follows I rely quite heavily on two books by Harvey Cox^[1] and Conrad Hyers^[2].

How seriously should we take the comic vein? Some thinkers would want to marginalize humour as beneath serious concern. Harold Watt (1946): 'It is the trick of comedy to confirm all our superficial judgements; it must make us ignore those which we regard as profound and eternal.' — *The Sense of Regain: A Theory of Comedy*. Humour may be trivial, clever but transient, of no lasting consequence. A lot of what we see weekly on television, for example, is churned out to formula by the commercial entertainment machine. Even so, it presents an interesting sociological/theological mirror to who humans think they are, how they see relationships, and what they think is the purpose of life. According to some sages we dally with laughter at our peril. Plato speaks of the comic art easily arousing the 'rebellious principle' in the populace. Saint Benedict, in his Rule, writes 'As for coarse jests and idle words that lead to laughter, these we condemn with a perpetual ban.' Baudelaire argued that 'there is a violent and satanic air in laughter ... intimately linked with the accident of the ancient fall.' Georg Frederick Meier was in no two minds about it: 'We are never to jest on or with things which, on account of their importance or weight, claim our utmost seriousness. There are things ... so great and important in themselves, as never to be thought of and mentioned but with sedateness and solemnity. Laughter on such

Frontispiece: 'The frolic of my Lord of Misrule' (BBC Hulton Picture Library)

[1] Harvey Cox: *The Feast of Fools - a theological essay on festivity & fantasy*, Harper & Row, New York, 1970

[2] Hyers, Conrad: *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith - a celebration of life and laughter*, The Pilgrim Press, New York, 1981

occasions is criminal and indecent ... For instance, all jests on religion, philosophy, and the like important subjects.' — *Thoughts on Jest* 1794. Reinhold Niebuhr, immediately post-war, reflected: 'Laughter is our reaction to immediate incongruities and those which do not affect us essentially. Faith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life ... Man's very position in the universe is incongruous. That is the problem of faith, and not of humour.' — *Discerning the Signs of the Times*. So, is there any connection at all between faith and humour?

However, Aristotle, quoting Gorgias, saw a kind of duality between the comic and the serious: 'Humour is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humour. For a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious; and a jest which will not bear serious examination is false wit.' Thomas Paine (1795) had something similar to say: 'The sublime and the ridiculous are often so nearly related, that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime, makes the ridiculous; and one step above the ridiculous, makes the sublime again.' — *Age of Reason*. My thesis is, that without doubt, it is worthwhile to look beyond the superficial to find meaning in a more profound humour which reflects the very nature of our being and our desire to become more fully human.

The perplexity of the human condition is well caught in the words of Alexander Pope:

"Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;
Still by himself abused, or disabused;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!"

— *An Essay on Man, Epistle 2 (1733)*

In the Genesis creation story we have man and woman, whom we may like to consider as the pinnacle of evolutionary creation, made out of the dust of the earth and a rib bone, very humble origins. Other creation myths are perhaps more astonishing. Apparently aborigines of South Australia tell of the first humans being made of dung, moulded into human form and then tickled into *laughter* and hence life. The sharp spasms of inhalation- exhalation: 'Aha! ha! ha!' which we call laughter (compare with crying) seem like a ritualised breathing.

There is a suggestion that sub-human laughter was born of aggression or antagonism, just as an animal bares its teeth in threat. We may have evolved to the point where a smile is an indication of friendly intent rather than hostility. It moves us from the tension of strangers meeting to relaxed cordiality. But laughter which is a regression to negative emotions begins to reflect a growl or a snarl. Certainly as non-verbal communication, laughter often accompanied by gesture, is a more primal, essential evidence of our feelings and intentions. Think of the laughter shared between mother, father and a baby without language, or the laughter which unites despite language and cultural barriers.

If we laugh at others we can also laugh at ourselves, for humour sees all as sharing in a common human nature and the common predicaments, embarrassments and temptations of life. The true humorist identifies with and laughs with, rather than *at* people. The medieval jester or fool, mocked others with his 'bauble', but it was also a caricature of himself. True humour is reflexive in the way it judges our own foibles and failings

Conrad Hyers wants us to distinguish true humour from satire, irony, wit, ingenious word-play and the merely comic. Humour at its best is a comic sensitivity to the riddle of our common existence and our 'fallen' nature. This internalisation opens up humour to empathy for and sympathy with. It becomes a vehicle for generosity. It is resolved into humility and compassion.

Laughter as Subversive

During the medieval "Feast of Fools" (about 1st January) the ordinary cathedral officials created parodies of the sacred rituals. A Lord of Misrule or a mock king or bishop was elected to preside over the festivity (see frontispiece). The established order was inverted as lowly persons were made exalted and the exalted were made the butt of jest, satire and ribaldry. For a brief time a world of fantasy prevailed and society had a vision of a quite different order of things. Of course the authorities were never happy with such anarchic displays with their overt radicalism, and following the Reformation the Feast of Fools gradually died out. Eventually the Industrial Revolution, the rise of capitalism and the work ethic, and today the emergence of the New Right pressed that kind of radical, subversive festivity to the margins. Humanity is now more celebrated for its work and rational intellectual capacity than its artistic, play-acting, story telling, visionary attributes. There are echoes of the old festivals today in New Year, Halloween and Guy Fawkes celebrations. Some of the same spirit reappears in some satirical television shows and the political cartoons of our daily news, but there it is somehow *contained* and safe as merely a spectacle, while its participants at home are dispersed, separated and have no relationships.

When the prevailing political (or management theory) regime is out of tune with our strongly held convictions, jokes against the regime bind those of a like mind together and help make the situation more tolerable. They use ridicule and satire to question the rationality of the current line of propaganda and help the truth to be discovered. Through history, tyrants and oppressive regimes have always had courageous opponents who used humour to subvert and point to alternatives. This leads to laughter in the cause of justice.

Laughter for Justice

We often experience laughter as two-edged. While laughter may resolve aggressive impulses, it is also used as a tool of aggression. Recall the laughter of cartoon villains. We hear the jeering laughter of children with discomfort. Sneering, derisive adult laughter is painful, and harming the spirit, borders on physical violence. Laughter may reinforce a sense of superiority or power & be used to manipulate and control, cf racist and sexist jokes. So what of the laughter that moves to restore a sense of justice?

Many thinkers through the ages have recognized how thin the line is that separates comedy from tragedy. The comic suggests that the essential difference between the two is merely a function of how we choose to view a situation. Life is fraught with enough disappointments, lost opportunities, overwhelming tragedies and chaos. The humorist attempts in humble ways to redress the balance and put the odds back in our favour. He or she champions the underdog.

Laughing at the postures of the proud and haughty, at an a superior or even an oppressor, momentarily reverses the order of things and equalizes the relationship. Here laughter is an escape valve for tension and frustration. Such laughter restores a balance and renews a sense of dignity and fair play. A comic justice is served.

There is an ethical dimension to laughter for the sake of justice. Hypocrisy and injustice are exposed in a new light so they cannot be ignored. The medieval king's jester was in a powerful position to bring to the notice of the ruler affairs wanting justice that no courtier would dare. Perhaps today we need a comic *Ombudsman*.

Laughter and Creativity

I had the privilege recently of being at a lecture given by Professor Roger Penrose, noted mathematician and cosmologist. Penrose made it a delightful experience with his quiet humour and whimsy. The intellectual abstraction of mathematics was made human by the delight in discovery (or revelation) of beautiful symmetries and unexpected relationships and harmonies. One felt close to a creative spirit. I draw a parallel here between Harvey Cox's

advocacy of fantasy as the seed-bed of creativity and the laughter of delight in the discovery of the new, the unusual, the remarkable.

Laughter is the adjunct of playfulness, a time of relaxation when firm rationality is let go, when the mind free-wheels allowing the sub-conscious to inject forgotten possibilities in new contexts: the pre-requisite for creativity.

“O fantasy, that at times does so snatch us out of
Ourselves that we are conscious of naught, even
Though a thousand trumpets sound about us,
Who makes thee, if the senses set naught before thee?
A light moves thee which takes its form in heaven, of
Itself, or by a will that sendeth it down.”
— Dante, *The Divine Comedy*

Laughter as Redemption

From the history of the Christian church we might conclude that the western religious tradition has no basis for laughter as a proper expression of faith. As Harvey Cox says of contemporary society, ‘Ours is a hard-nosed, pragmatic, problem-solving culture’. We are taught to give pre-eminence to the world of fact (not the world of truth, I note). Calvinistic Puritanism turned its back on jocularity, mirth and ‘unseemly’ behaviour. Sigmund Freud warned us to respect the ‘reality principle’, and draw the line between fact and fantasy.

Too much has been promised by, and demanded of, rational western science and technology. The flights of the human spirit in literature, music, art, dance and human relationships lies largely outside it’s ken. There is an ‘irrational’ dimension of human nature and experience which must be acknowledged for our healthy future. Humour, comedy, fun and laughter provide one of the keys to that dimension.

Cox speaks of religious people as those who ‘grasp their own lives within a larger historical and cosmic setting’, seeing themselves as part of a greater whole, a longer story in which they play a part. Song, ritual and vision link us to this story, placing us somewhere between Eden and the Kingdom of God, with a past and a future. Festivity marks crucial turns in the story and fantasy is the powerful tool which asks ‘what if ... ?’ Humour and laughter, their outward manifestation, (and sorrow the converse) is the strong thread that binds this experience together. But without real festive occasions and the nurture of fantasy, with a set of common memories and collective hopes, the spirit and the psyche of women and men shrink. We become something less than human, with neither origin nor destiny.

Nietzsche (a surprising source!) , in a passage of *Zarathustra*, said that he “would only believe in a god who could dance” and went on to identify Satan as the one who is “serious, thorough, profound and solemn.” as false god and antigod, it is Satan who is “the spirit of gravity, through whom all things fall.”

Konrad Lorenz *On Aggression* (1966), suggests that the survival of civilization depends to a significant degree on our capacity for humour. People who laugh together are less likely to kill each other. Humour is a mechanism for ritualizing aggressive tendencies in substitution for the violent and destructive options that we have. I suggest also that groups who laugh together are more likely to survive and prosper in their life together. The humorist has both a peace-making and a harmonizing role.

Gordon Allport refers to the psychological function of humour as that of helping “to integrate personality by disposing of all conflicts that do not really matter.” — *The Individual and His Religion* 1950. At a physiological level there is a recognized therapeutic value in both individual and shared laughter. When we are willing to abandon ourselves wholly to the ‘business’ of laughing we find that it shakes up, stimulates, relieves stress and leaves our whole system feeling invigorated and relaxed. There are suggestions that brain and body chemistry are improved to our better health and more effective functioning by frequent bouts of laughter.

Laughter is a mark of hope. The hopeless do not laugh. Humour is a way of asserting the *self*, of reclaiming power, knowing that justice will come, affirming the meaning of existence. Recall the humour of the wartime concentration camps. Laughter helps us to lose our solemn concerns and find ourselves again in some larger dimension. Humour gives us an all-embracing vision and puts a wholesome perspective on the future. Even the sober Kierkegaard asserted, "The more thoroughly and substantially a human being exists, the more he will discover the comical. Even one who has merely conceived a great plan toward accomplishing something in the world will discover it." True, wholesome humour offers a special kind of salvation. Its laughter has a redemptive quality.

When we are beset by intolerable change, a time of crisis where we become the *object* of systems beyond our control that act upon us and in spite of us, (e.g. job restructuring, redundancy) laughter is a way of declaring those agents as irrational — 'they' must be crazy. Laughter helps explain the painful as irrational. For example, work so much gives meaning to life that when it is lost, life is dislocated for a time. We must seek for more fundamental tokens of our identity. Jokes and laughter (even if sardonic) afford a healing bridge of the gap between the painful today and the realities we must face tomorrow.

Harvey Cox in his *Feast of Fools*, makes a strong plea for the place of imagination, festival and fantasy in healthy living. In comparison with all other creatures 'humanity is essentially festive and fanciful', says Cox. It is the quality of *born-again* laughter that should accompany festivity and fancy — the very breath of delight — which is worthy of our deep understanding and cultivation. Cox goes on to remind us that in a world of constant change (threat), festivity and fantasy are indispensable for fully human survival. Humans need to be innovative and adaptive, drawing from the richest wealth of experience, he says. Festivity and fantasy break bounds, open the past, present and future to us and stimulate creativity. Laughter accompanies and encourages this transformation and takes its part in our redemption from a spiritual death.

A Paradigm for Laughter

Conrad Hyers invites us to think of humour on three levels.

The Laughter of Paradise

Simple and innocent, this is fun for its own sake, working no agenda - a form of playing for the sake of playing - entering a freedom, a realm free of reason and logic. We can frolic, play the fool, be wild and carefree, having no *responsibility*, having no care for what is *appropriate*.

In this humour no one is put down or diminished, no one is manipulated, there is no racial or sexual tension; the joker is not superior to the *object* of the humour. This is a pure 'waste of time': it is not profitable for anything. It is simply a state of *being*. It is in the world of innocence prior to the knowledge of good and evil. Nothing is sacred or profane. Nothing is *important* or *significant*, but neither is it *trivial* and yet everything is imbued with a particular sense of *holiness*. Everything may be the subject and object of laughter. When we are as children, we know the *Laughter of Paradise*.

The Laughter of Paradise Lost

When we become self-conscious and more sophisticated, we find ourselves in the midst of conflict and anxiety, success and failure, faith and doubt. Humour now is not all innocence, but is immersed in these tensions and becomes a comic reflection of them. It proceeds from Adam & Eve's 'knowledge of good and evil'.

Laughter may be used to express fear and antagonism and our insecurity. e.g. WC Fields: 'no one who hates children can be all bad'. This is a symbolic way of resolving the irritation which we all feel at times. Such a quip is a ritual 'winning' which helps us feel better about the uncomfortable realities that surround us.

On a higher level, this laughter is a way of dispensing poetic justice, mocking hypocrisy, humbling the proud, restoring equity, reducing conflict.

At other times this humour helps us come to terms with the ambivalence, ambiguity and awkwardness of being human: flesh and spirit, sex and love, instinct and reason. Hence jokes about our silliness, our eating and sexual habits and our bodily functions.

The essential paradox of human nature to which Pascal refers in his *Pensées* and Pope in his *Essay on Man* – the glory and the pathos – has its funny side as well. Our existential predicament creates the tensions from which comedy draws its energy. In reminding us of who we are, humour has a prophetic function. As a way of helping us accept ourselves as cosmic misfits, humour has a cathartic function, cf the court jester, mocking the frailty of the king; but also as a scapegoat for the anger and frustration of the king.

This humour helps us come to terms with absurdity, evil, suffering and death, by refusing to take them absolutely seriously. We can refuse to be overcome by them. Laughter is not all gaiety. It also expresses the struggle against the harsh side of life. cf Jewish and Black capacity for humour in the midst of a tragic history. Here humour expresses the unquenchable nobility of the human spirit, and the survival of hope.

The Laughter of Paradise Regained

Intimations of this laughter, experienced only occasionally, are seen in the laughter of innocence, but they are not the same. It is as though it comes from beyond good and evil, rather than before it. This is the laughter of tolerance, sympathy and wisdom. It is the laughter of friends where no explanations or excuses are needed, rather than the laughter of adversaries. There is no rancour, but magnanimity. It reflects not the conflict but the resolution of a question. A victory is achieved over the absurdity of our position through humility. This is the laughter of inner strength rather than weakness.

It is the laughter of a mature freedom, unity and *harmony*, arising from a profound sense of security – an affirmation of life. It proceeds from a confidence in the depth of meaning of this life. It is the laughter of faith. The humour that breeds this laughter does not come from the tensions of our existence but from its harmonies. It is not defensive or assertive. This laughter *includes* rather than sets apart. We no longer laugh at people, but *with* them.

Humour shifts from playful innocence, through truth and justice, to humility, compassion and love. In this state one becomes fully free to laugh and feel at one with the laughter of the cosmos – the essential mystery and paradox, the divine absurdity of the creation as we know it, love overcoming pain, in a tiny pocket of the vastness of the cosmos. It is the laughter when justice is honoured and peace is assured. The judgemental aspect of humour (prophecy or iconoclasm) is sublimed into mercy. It is then a response to the grace of divine forgiveness.

The comic spirit of *Paradise Regained* is just, peacegiving, loving, joyful, and dynamic.

Postscript

‘To rejoice at another person’s joy is like being in heaven’ — Meister Eckhart

Ralph A. Pannett
May 1993

Appendix

A selection of quotations on humour, arranged in chronological order.

Sarah laughs:

Both Abraham and Sarah had grown very old, and Sarah was past the age of child-bearing. So Sarah laughed to herself and said, 'I am past bearing children now that I am out of my time, and my husband is old.' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child when I am old?" Is anything impossible for the Lord?'

— *Genesis 18: 11-14*

Plato c. 400 BC

'Jocos et Dii amant.' — Even the gods love jokes

Aristotle (384 – 322 BC), quoting Gorgias

'Humour is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humour. For a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious; and a jest which will not bear serious examination is false wit.'

Lucius Seneca, c. 50 AD

'If I want to look at a fool, I have only to look in a mirror.'

Saint Paul

'If any man among you seemeth to be wise to this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.'

— *I Corinthians 3: 18*

Meister Eckhart, c. 1260 - 1327

'To rejoice at another person's joy is like being in heaven'

Dante Alighieri, c. 1320

'O fantasy, that at times does so snatch us out of
Ourselves that we are conscious of naught, even
Though a thousand trumpets sound about us,
Who makes thee, if the senses set naught before thee?
A light moves thee which takes its form in heaven, of
Itself, or by a will that sendeth it down.'

— *The Divine Comedy*

William Shakespeare, c. 1600

'Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun; it shines everywhere.'

— *Twelfth Night, Act III Sc I*

Fulke Greville, 1554-1628

'Man is the only creature endowed with the power of laughter'.

Alexander Pope, 1733

'Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;
Still by himself abused, or disabused;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!'

— *An Essay on Man, Epistle 2*

Samuel Richardson, 1748

'I am forced to try to make myself laugh that I may not cry: for one or other I must do; and is it not philosophy carried to the highest pitch for a man to conquer such tumults of soul as I am sometimes agitated by, and in the very height of the storm to quaver out a horselaugh?'
— *Clarissa Harlowe*

James Boswell 1791

Edwards remarks to Johnson, 'I have tried too in my time to to be a philosopher, but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in.'
— *Life of Samuel Johnson*.

Georg Frederick Meier 1794

'We are never to jest on or with things which, on account of their importance or weight, claim our utmost seriousness. There are things ... so great and important in themselves, as never to be thought of and mentioned but with sedateness and solemnity. Laughter on such occasions is criminal and indecent ... For instance, all jests on religion, philosophy, and the like important subjects.'
— *Thoughts on Jest*

Thomas Paine 1795

'The sublime and the ridiculous are often so nearly related, that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime, makes the ridiculous; and one step above the ridiculous, makes the sublime again.' — *Age of Reason*

William Hazlitt 1778-1830

'Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be.'

Søren Kierkegaard, 1813 - 1855

'The more one suffers, the more, I believe, one has a sense of the comic. It is only by the deepest suffering that one acquires the authority in the art of the Comic; an authority which by one word transforms as by magic the resoundable creature one calls man into a caricature.'

Friedrich Nietzsche (1892), in a passage of *Zarathustra*, said that he "would only believe in a god who could dance" and went on to identify Satan as the one who is "serious, thorough, profound and solemn." as false god and antigod, it is Satan who is "the spirit of gravity, through whom all things fall."

Enid Welsford 1935

'Clownage ... may easily act as a wholesome nourishment to the sense of secret spiritual independence of that which would otherwise be the intolerable tyranny of circumstance.'
— *The Fool: His Social & Literary History*

Reinhold Niebuhr, 1946.

'Laughter is our reaction to immediate incongruities and those which do not affect us essentially. Faith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life ... Man's very position in the universe is incongruous. That is the problem of faith, and not of humour.'
— *Discerning the Signs of the Times*

Harold Watt 1946

'It is the trick of comedy to confirm all our superficial judgements; it must make us ignore those which we regard as profound and eternal.'
— *The Sense of Regain: A Theory of Comedy*

Karl Barth, 1886 - 1968

'The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about God in a book of Dogmatics. They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each is thicker than the previous ones. As they laugh, they say to one another, "Look! here he comes now with his little pushcart full of volumes of the *Dogmatics!*"'

— *Portrait of Karl Barth*

Eugene Ionesco, 1912 - ?

'To become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying ... Laughter alone does not respect any taboo, laughter alone inhibits the creation of new anti-taboos; the comic alone is capable of giving us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence.'

Harald Höffding

'The mere possibility of employing laughter as a weapon shows that it involves the idea of power.'

— *Psykologiske Undersøgelser*

Sallie Nichols, 1980

'It was the function of the king's jester to remind him of his follies, of the mortality of all men, and to help him guard against the sin of hubris, or overweening pride.'

— *Jung and Tarot: An Archetypal Journey*

Steve Allen, 1981

'The best humor, in my opinion, is found in the frequently tragic reality of human experience.'

— *Funny People*

David Galloway

'Both clown and saint find themselves in conflict with a world that seems infinitely resourceful in its devices for crippling or murdering the self; as a minimum requirement, the clown withstands the reality, the saint transcends it, and in the most optimistic embodiments, they transform reality.'