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SMILING WITH GOD: REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTIANITY AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMOR

Robert C. Roberts

This essay evaluates two arguments found in John Morreall's *Taking Laughter Seriously*: That Christianity is incompatible with a sense of humor since the latter requires that a person take nothing with absolute seriousness, and that God can have no sense of humor because he is omniscient. I point out that seriousness about something is a necessary condition of humor and that what people find funny is in part a function of what they take seriously. I illustrate these points with examples from Samuel Johnson and Soren Kierkegaard. Then I show how ultimate seriousness is compatible with a sense of humor, by appeal to Kierkegaard's notion of a "way out" of responsibility for the object of one's seriousness. Here I illustrate with St. Francis of Assisi, William James, and Kierkegaard. Morreall's claim that God's omniscience rules out his having a sense of humor turns on the thesis, fundamental to his book, that humor depends on "psychological shift," which he mistakenly identifies with surprise. I distinguish these concepts, show that humor should not be construed even in terms of the (weaker) concept of psychological shift, and suggest a way of understanding God's omniscience such that it is compatible with his sense of humor.

In a recent book on the psychology of humor¹ John Morreall claims that Christianity is an intrinsically humorless outlook, thus putting himself rather in disagreement with Kierkegaard, who calls it "the most humorous view of life in world-history."² First, "the person with a sense of humor will...live with the awareness that nothing is important in an absolute way."³ Since for Christians the kingdom of God and being fit for it are important in an absolute way, Christians can have no sense of humor. If they do occasionally smile or titter, it is only "because they fall short of a whole-hearted commitment to Christianity."⁴ Secondly God cannot have a sense of humor because, being omniscient, He cannot be surprised by incongruities, and surprise is an essential part of "the psychological shift that is behind laughter."⁵ Thus we have the grim picture of a straitlaced all-knowing Father presiding dourly over His brood of stolid little heavenly overachievers. Morreall refutes Christianity not by showing it false, but by showing it so repulsive that God help us if it isn't!

But happily for God and His litter, both of Morreall's theses are false. Humor



is not incompatible with being ultimately serious about life; indeed an ultimate orienting seriousness about life gives one's sense of humor a depth and integrity and scope that it will not otherwise have. And surprise is not essential to perceiving incongruities as humorous.

1

Let me start with the first thesis. Morreall says "Now if we ask what kinds of situations people are in fact capable of finding humorous, I think the answer is that any incongruity whatever might amuse someone."⁶ He goes on to say that from the moral point of view there are, however, limits on what it is permissible to be amused by. We ought not to be amused when horrible disasters befall people. But surely there are not only moral limits on amusement, but psychological limits on what incongruities *can* amuse us. For example, the incongruity must be susceptible of an interpretation in terms which connect it with human interest. It is true, as Morreall notes, that the incongruous object need not itself be a person,⁷ but without some human interest in the matter of the incongruity, there can be no humor. An anomalous motion of a planet is incongruous, but it would be extraordinary if someone found it funny. If somebody did find it funny, it would turn out that he was thinking of the anomaly as upsetting somebody's astronomical theory, or as being a trick that God plays on us, or in some other way that places the anomaly in the context of human concerns. And it seems to me that, other things being equal, the more closely the incongruity is connected with somebody's projects and concerns, the funnier it will be. The funniest jokes are about people; animals are funny largely because they lend themselves to personification; and the bowling ball in Morreall's refrigerator is funny (if it is) because it fails to be an item *people* eat, much less a perishable one or one more delicate when served chilled, and is something *people* roll down bowling alleys on Friday nights.

Morreall points out that "what a person finds incongruous depends on what he finds congruous"⁸: if we had no relatively fixed expectations about the way things go, we would perceive no incongruities and thus have no sense of humor. But a similar principle, which he seems not to notice, is that incongruities would not be funny to us if we had no serious interest in anything. Just as incongruity presupposes the "normal," so the pleasant (as well as the unpleasant) perception of it presupposes an interest in the matter of the incongruity—an interest other than the interest in being amused. When Long-Chen-pa the Buddhist lama says, "Since everything is but an apparition perfect in being what it is, having nothing to do with good or bad, acceptance or rejection, one may well burst out in laughter"⁹ his laughter itself betrays him. Were he as indifferent as his philosophy prescribes, he would also be humor-blind. For all its power to "distance" us

from “ourselves,” humor is as parasitic upon serious interest as it is upon normal congruity.

The relativity of humor to interest is evident in the fact that humor has special interest groups. While almost everybody likes humor about sex (including many who won’t admit it), business people especially enjoy stories about business misadventures, and church people especially like those stories about conversations between St. Peter and clerical knockers at the pearly gates. We are more alert to humorous incongruities concerning things and persons we love—our children, our lovers, our heroes, ourselves. The refrigerated bowling ball is funnier if you are a bowler and funnier if the refrigerator is yours, and funnier if your friends put it there; the glitter of humor would be less if you found it in a stranger’s fridge and had no idea how it got there, and were indifferent to bowling. It seems to me there are two ways in which interest fosters humor: intrinsically, by engaging us with the incongruous situation, and by determining which set of concepts will shape our vision.

2

James Boswell records the following remark of Samuel Johnson: “Talking of a penurious gentleman of our acquaintance, Johnson said, ‘Sir, he is narrow, not so much from avarice, as from impotence to spend his money. He cannot find it in his heart to pour out a bottle of wine; but he would not much care if it should sour.’”¹⁰ The humor here is pretty universally accessible. Almost everybody can sympathize with the desire to pile up goods; and so the incongruity of someone complacently letting his wine sour if only he can avoid dispensing it, is both obvious to us, and comical. At least it takes no more than an incisive and colorful formulation like Johnson’s to make it so.

Compare with this the following from Kierkegaard. A man becomes aware of a spiritual defect in himself, something he cannot accept in his makeup. But instead of addressing it head-on by attempting to correct it, or by resigning himself to it, or by repenting of it, he ignores it, hoping it will go away. Every now and again he allows himself just enough self-awareness to check whether the defect has gone away; but after a while he gives up the hope of that. Turning away from self-examination altogether he immerses himself in outward life such as business, family and politics. From this vantage point he occasionally remembers his former despair, and considers that he has overcome it. Kierkegaard comments: “It is impossible to depict this kind of despair accurately without a certain touch of satire. It is comical that he wants to talk about having been in despair; it is appalling that after the conquering of despair (according to his view), his condition is in fact despair.”¹¹ The humor that Kierkegaard describes is far less accessible than that in the remark from Johnson. With effort we can

reconstruct his point of view, and through empathetic imagination get a little feeling for the humor; but still, most of us don't *share* it. And the reason, simply stated, is that we are not at home in the terms of construal that bring out the incongruity of this man thinking he has overcome his despair. From our point of view, it hardly seems an incongruity at all. We are not attuned to the spiritual issues about which Kierkegaard is writing, and our lack of attunement is traceable, in part, to a deficiency of concern for moral and spiritual integrity.

In connection with Morreall's thesis that a sense of humor excludes any ultimate seriousness, the lesson I draw from Kierkegaard here is that the concern for integrity of self, far from excluding a sense of humor, is the foundation of one. And it is at least a very good candidate for being an ultimately serious one; in Kierkegaard's mind, at least, to fail to become a self is the ultimate human failure.

So it shouldn't surprise us that there is a special Christian sense of humor, a purchase on absurdity begotten of seeking God's kingdom, and thus seeing the world from, as it were, God's perspective. This humor is rarely exemplified because concerted seeking of the kingdom is rarely exemplified, and it isn't easy to communicate, because most of its potential recipients are not very well qualified for it. It takes a saint to smile this way, or at least a person who, through her seeking, has come to know wherein sainthood consists. And further, it takes a certain expressive talent to put this perception of absurdity in a way that makes it available to an audience not immediately alive to it. Kierkegaard possesses this sense of humor perhaps better than anyone, though Chesterton and C.S. Lewis come to mind and—if Chesterton is to be believed—St. Francis of Assisi.

According to Chesterton a dramatic transformation of perspective occurs in St. Francis' mind while he is in the cave of dark desperation to which he retreats after suffering two enormous humiliations: of failing in a military exploit which at the time he took to be God's will for him (though it was also to give him the glory of a hero); and a court conviction of being a thief, which in a sense he was, for he took some of his father's yardgoods and sold them to get materials for rebuilding a church. In that cave Francis somehow comes to see humiliation not as an impediment to his service of God and a blow to his self-worth, but as itself his service of God and his own joy and crown.

"He saw himself as an object, very small and distinct like a fly walking on a clear window pane; and it was unmistakably a fool. And as he stared at the word 'fool' written in luminous letters before him, the word itself began to shine and change."¹² This elemental shift in the foundation of Francis' self-esteem, this view from beneath, transforms his perception of *everything*, giving it a look of radical contingency: "He might see and love every tile on the steep roofs or every bird on the battlements; but he would see them all in a new and divine light of eternal danger and dependence. Instead of being merely proud of his

strong city because it could not be moved, he would be thankful to God Almighty that it had not been dropped.”¹³ In his enthusiasm for both God and what God has made, Francis projects his own humbleness onto the creation. His God’s-eye perspective on things saves him from being a nature-worshiper, and this escape from romanticism is a sense of humor: “For us the elements are like heralds who tell us with trumpet and tabard that we are drawing near the city of a great king; but [Francis] hails them with an old familiarity that is almost an old frivolity. He calls them his Brother Fire and his Sister Water.”¹⁴ A man who salutes every created thing from this perspective and out of this great enthusiasm for life, has the wherewithal constantly within him for the light touch; nothing is “sacred” because everything is sacred, being from the hand of God and utterly in His hand.

3

The grain of truth in Morreall’s claim that a sense of humor requires the absence of any ultimate commitment is better expressed in Kierkegaard’s observation that a sense of humor about a situation requires the individual to have a “way out,”¹⁵ an expedient for backing off and objectifying the situation. It is not, for example, that you can see the humor in somebody’s being caught in a lie only if you have no ultimate commitment to truth-telling; but rather that to see the humor in the situation (without weakening your commitment), you need an auxiliary belief which disemburdens you of total responsibility for correcting the evil.

We have already seen how in St. Francis’ case God’s sovereignty allows for Francis’ light touch. William James thinks the only justification of a belief in the Hegelian Absolute is that it enables us to be serious people without being crushed or worn out by the seriousness. “What do believers in the Absolute mean by saying that their belief affords them comfort? They mean that since, in the Absolute finite evil is ‘overruled’ already, we may, therefore, whenever we wish, treat the temporal as if it were potentially the eternal, be sure that we can trust its outcome, and, without sin, dismiss our fear and drop the worry of our finite responsibility. In short, they mean that we have a right ever and anon to take a moral holiday, to let the world wag in its own way, feeling that its issues are in better hands than ours and are none of our business.”¹⁶ The Christian God, like the Hegelian Absolute, is in ultimate control. By malevolence, error, or lassitude we may thwart Him provisionally, but He will prevail in the end. Believing *Him* to exist is thus the “way out” by which, without relaxing her seriousness, the Christian is able, in appropriate circumstances, to treat moral evil with a light touch. Morreall’s thesis that Christianity is incompatible with a sense of humor seems to be traceable to a heterodox theology. His concept is that of an impotently “good” god whose only positive attribute is his moral

demand.

But the Christian rumor has it that God, characteristically but surprisingly, has done more that just remain in ultimate control. In anticipation of the last day He has subjected Himself to moral evil and in a mysterious reversal overcome it. The consequence of God's act is that every act of human striving for righteousness is legally obviated and spiritually thrown, by the excessive contrast, in a comic light. It is not of course morally or spiritually obviated, for full obedient personhood before God remains the ultimate goal of human life and anything less than it is just a shame. To quote Kierkegaard one more time: "Although it is the utmost strenuousness, imitation [of Christ—that is, striving for righteousness should be like a jest, a childlike act—if it is to mean something in earnest, that is, be of any value before God—the Atonement is the earnestness. It is detestable, however, for a man to want to use grace, 'since all is grace,' to avoid all striving."¹⁷ So the atonement—the central Christian fact—holds out the possibility for a human life to be a synthesis of the deepest seriousness and the lightest touch. The seriousness and the jest are mutually supportive. For the humor and its attendant joy cannot be deep without the seriousness; and without the "distance" afforded by the atonement the seriousness is "transformed into agonizing anxiety in which a man is burned up, so to speak, and less than ever begins to strive."¹⁸

4

Having seen some reasons for thinking Morreall wrong when he says that a person's having a sense of humor requires him or her to take nothing with ultimate seriousness, let us turn to his other claim, that "the Christian God could have no sense of humor. He knows fully everything and every event in the past, present, and future, and so nothing that happened could surprise him. He could not discover something he did not already know about, nor could he adopt a new way of looking at anything. For these reasons, and because he is a changeless being, nothing that happened could amuse God."¹⁹

Let us begin by distinguishing surprise from what Morreall calls a "psychological shift." He mistakenly identifies these ideas. For a person to be genuinely surprised by some perception or thought, the latter must be new to him, either through his having never experienced it before, or through his having forgotten it. Unless forgetting occurs, one cannot be surprised by the same experience twice. By contrast, a person can experience a psychological shift many times. A clear example of this is the shift which can be produced, often at will, in the perception of the kind of figures used to illustrate gestalt psychology. When the perception or thought to which one shifts is the awareness of an incongruity, and some other psychological conditions obtain, the experience will be one of

amusement. Morreall may be right that all cases of humor involve some psychological shift, but it is highly implausible to hold that surprise is essential to the experience of humor. We are often amused again at old jokes, and it is farfetched to save the surprise theory as Morreall does²⁰ by claiming that in being amused again we are noticing some *new* (to us) dimension of incongruity. There are situations of which the memory remains amusing for many years. After a while we may not laugh out loud (it is slightly more plausible that surprise is necessary to laughter than that it is necessary to humor), but we continue to be amused, perhaps even throughout an adulthood.

No doubt surprise is an important contributing factor in the funniness of many jokes. But its contribution seems to be that of making the incongruity striking, vivid; and there are other ways this can be accomplished—for example, through colorful presentation, choice of words, concreteness of detail. Another factor in keeping a memory amusing is the individual's interest and involvement in it. The essential thing here seems to be the “freshness,” as we might call it, of the perception of incongruity. Surprise is a powerful way of producing freshness, and it is this fact that inclines us to think surprise essential.

But if it is freshness of construal, rather than surprise (or even the weaker phenomenon of “shift”), that is basic to humor, then God's being omniscient would not seem to rule out His having a sense of humor. For Him to appreciate incongruities humorously He would have to 1) have a perspective of congruity from which to appreciate incongruities; 2) have an interest in the matter of the incongruities; and 3) be able to keep His perceptions of incongruity fresh. If God's omniscience is such that He not only *knows* everything, but is also simultaneously *attending* with equal attention to everything, then perhaps His omniscience will rule out His fulfilling the first requirement. For the perception of incongruities does seem to presuppose a certain selectivity of attention; it requires that one way of focusing on things be “normal” for the percipient, so that another can highlight incongruities. This is the truth in Morreall's concept of a psychological shift. But God's knowledge of everything may be partially dispositional; His omniscience may not imply His omni-awareness, for He may have the power to attend selectively to the things that are. In that case, of course, He is not the radically “changeless being” that Morreall thinks God must be. But nothing in the Christian tradition makes that interpretation of God's changelessness compulsory or orthodox. Nor is there anything in that tradition, that I know of, to rule out God's interest in His creation or His power to keep His perceptions fresh. In fact, as regards keeping perceptions fresh, I can't think of anybody more likely to be able to do it, despite His advanced age.

NOTES

1. *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1983).
2. *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1970), entry No. 1681 (in volume 2).
3. Morreall, op. cit., p. 125.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 126.
6. Ibid., p. 110.
7. Ibid., p. 64.
8. Ibid., p. 62.
9. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 127.
10. *The Life of Johnson* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1948), p. 364 (conversation of 12 April 1776).
11. *The Sickness Unto Death*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 56.
12. G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), p. 86.
13. Ibid., p. 88.
14. Ibid., pp. 90-91.
15. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 462f.
16. *Pragmatism*, edited by Bruce Kuklick, (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), p. 36.
17. *Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, entry No. 1909 (in volume 2).
18. Ibid.
19. Morreall, op. cit., p. 126.
20. Ibid., p. 50.