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SENSE OF HUMOR AS A CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

Robert C. Roberts

Puritanism has been defined as the fear that somewhere out there somebody is having fun. John Morreall has argued that a sense of humor is incompatible with Christian belief.¹ The sight of Christians frolicking about like children at recess inclines some to think the Christians are finally becoming *human*.

Such people have probably not read Chesterton or been to a Young Life meeting. *Inside* the Christian camp, we are often told (and for some reason we keep needing to be reminded) that Christianity is not a sour philosophy. Life is a matter of life-and-death, it is true, and Christians have responsibilities; but also they can play and laugh; faith is (or should be) a liberation from despair and grief and guilt, a life of thanksgiving and joyful service. Sometimes, in this context, we are told that Christians should have a sense of humor. Søren Kierkegaard even goes so far as to call Christianity "the most humorous view of life in world history."² How does a sense of humor especially fit one for life as a Christian? What is there about Christianity that makes it especially hospitable to a sense of humor?

The first approach that occurs to us is to list some Christian "values" that a sense of humor can achieve. Christianity is a religion of joy, and amusement is *enjoyable*; *ergo*, Christians should endorse amusement. Christianity is pro health and healing, and laughter is at least as good for you as jogging and Brussels sprouts. (We think of Norman Cousins getting healed by yukking it up over Charley Chaplin.) A sense of humor about *ourselves* can liberate us from narcissism and depression and self-pity and other evils, giving us a healthy "objectivity" about ourselves. This in turn makes us better companions: and good communal life is, after all, an important Christian value.

I think we can do better than talk vaguely of Christian "values" and of how humor, also vaguely conceived, fosters these. We all know about spiritually dubious senses of humor: Humor can be malicious, racist, sacrilegious, sexist, "sick," silly and trivial; and we might suspect that people who enjoy these in a big way tend to be malicious, racist, sacrilegious, sexist, "sick," silly and trivial *people*. If a sense of humor is a Christian virtue, it should have some special features in consequence of its fitting into the *Christian* personality.³ On the other hand, Christian amusement will also have some features that all amusement has.

I shall look at five characteristics of amusement and ask what implications

the Christian life has, with respect to each feature, for the shape of a Christian sense of humor. The five characteristics of amusement that I'll examine are 1) perception of incongruity, 2) perspectivity, 3) dissociation, 4) freshness, and 5) enjoyment. A distinctively Christian sense of humor is one that is shaped by the Christian narratives and their concepts. Two of its characteristics in particular justify regarding it as a virtue⁴ alongside such other Christian virtues as gratitude, hope, and compassion. First, it is a capacity for "vision" or "perception" of Christianly important incongruities in oneself and others; as such it is a form of Christian discernment and supports whatever other Christian virtues depend on such discernment. Second, when directed towards oneself, a Christian sense of humor is a form of humility. While virtually any morality might generate a distinctive sense of humor, Christian theology/psychology is especially prone to this because it promotes a dissociation between one's actual character and one's true character. I shall also point out how humor forms a natural bridge to Christianity for many non-believers and half-hearted Christians and how, typical of virtues, a Christian sense of humor cannot be a virtue unless it is allied with other traits.

1. *Perception of Incongruity*

It is fairly widely acknowledged among philosophers of humor that amusement⁵ occurs characteristically in response to perception of incongruities, that is, the construal of something in terms of something else that fits oddly. There are competing views, such as Hobbes's "superiority" theory and Freud's "relief" theory, but I think that John Morreall has adequately answered them, and will not here go into the debate myself.⁶ To have a sense of humor is to be especially prone to perceive incongruities of one sort or another. It is the business of the humorist to present his or her material in such a way that the incongruities become vivid. To this end the humorist is an artist in the management of vocabulary, vocal inflection, set-up, timing, facial expression, bodily posture, and whatever else it takes. Just about any kind of incongruity can be funny, as long as it captures people's interest and is not too painful. Funny incongruities almost invariably have some connection with human life, because that is what interests us most.

The antics of chimpanzees are comical to us because they look at once human and non-human. To see them as funny is almost invariably to see them as pseudo-humans; if we see them simply as normal chimpanzees (something difficult to do on short acquaintance), they do not look funny to us. Caricatures are funny because they both look like their subject and yet exaggerate certain features incongruously; through exaggerating features that are already somewhat incongruous, the good caricaturist brings out what is comical (that is, incongruous) in the subject *himself*. My brother used to speak fluent German with a perfect hick-Kansas accent; it was practically unintelligible

to Germans, but to those who knew both German and hick-Kansas the effect was hilarious. This also functions as a caricature of some Americans speaking German. Erma Bombeck's title "I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression," like other puns, is funny by virtue of suggesting, by context, an incongruous sense of a word. When one philosopher diagnoses another as suffering from "hardening of the categories," the utterance is comical because of the incongruous application of the medical vocabulary to a non-medical context (produced by the similarity of sound between "category" and "artery"), with the suggestion that categorial rigidity is a sort of disease. When Oscar Wilde says "Life is much too important to be taken seriously," this true comment on the impropriety of lugubriousness is funny because it seems to contradict the truism that important things are the ones that ought to be taken seriously.

What has this to do with Christianity? While all the above can be "good clean fun," and are certainly not *incompatible* with Christianity, there is nothing essentially Christian about them. (In the appropriate setting the quip from Wilde and the philosophical joke might be placed in the service of Christian insight, but the setting would have to provide what was distinctively Christian.) But Christianity is a perspective from which certain important incongruities become visible. One Christian type of comic perception is exemplified in a passage from Thomas Merton, who reports that Buggy Jerwood, chaplain of Oakham school in Merton's time, used to preach on I Cor. 13, confusing a Christian concept.

The boys listened tolerantly to these thoughts. But I think St Peter and the twelve Apostles would have been rather surprised at the concept that Christ had been scourged and beaten by soldiers, cursed and crowned with thorns and subjected to unutterable contempt and finally nailed to the Cross and left to bleed to death in order that we might all become gentlemen.⁷

Merton notes that "the boys listened tolerantly to these thoughts." Presumably none of them found Mr. Jerwood's sermons amusing in the way that Merton did at the time of writing. And the reason, probably, was that they were not sufficiently developed as Christians for the distinction between behaving like a gentleman and exemplifying Christian love to be salient for them. As a consequence, they did not perceive the ludicrousness of someone's preaching mere gentlemanliness from a Christian pulpit and in the Christian vocabulary. Merton brings out the humor in this by sharply juxtaposing the incongruous pair: the pathos of the Christian salvation story and the concept of a gentleman. It is to the credit of Merton's Christian discernment that he now finds the spectacle of Mr. Jerwood's preaching amusing, and to the credit of his skill as a humorist that he can amuse us with what amuses him. Whatever we might want to say about Merton's capacity to be amused by puns from Bombeck and quips from Wilde, it seems clear that his capacity to be amused by the likes of Mr. Jerwood is something very much like a Christian virtue.

It is a form of discernment conditioned by the Christian story and its categories. But it is more than an "intellectual" discernment; it is a kind of perception (see section 4 below).

The incongruity in the behavior of Buggy Jerwood is just one instance of an endless supply of incongruities in human action and demeanor which become visible to one who looks upon the world with Christian eyes. The sight of kings and presidents and corporate executives and university professors strutting about as though they are indispensable to the well-being of the human race becomes laughable when projected against the vision of a sovereign God who gives and takes power as he will, and by whose grace alone those live who live. The very concept of a "moral majority" is a scream when seen from the perspective of a people whose history is that of at most a sinful but believing minority. The sight of myself trying to make my life completely safe with insurance policies and check-ups and retirement systems and health food and jogging becomes ridiculous if I acknowledge that I am like the withering grass and that God alone is the source of my security. On someone who feels self-righteous because he gives 15% of his gross income to charity a ludicrous light is cast by considering that he is not an owner, but only a steward of it anyway. If I believe that whatever I possess I have because God has welcomed me into his family, then I satirize myself if I try to gain importance by becoming very learned and having a fat list of publications. And so on.

To become a Christian is to inherit the wherewithal for an exponential increase in the number of important incongruities one can see, and thus for comical impressions of the "world." Perhaps this explains in part why Kierkegaard called Christianity "the most humorous view of life in world-history."

The above characterizations may fail to strike someone as funny, and if they do fail, it is worth asking why. I can think of two possible explanations. One is that I am not a very good humorist, and so have not presented them in such a way as to make vivid the incongruities I mention. To do so really well would require artistry, and probably also more verbal space than the one-liners I have devoted to them. The other possibility is that the person fails to find them funny because he doesn't have a taste for that kind of humor—after all, there are people who don't have a taste for sick humor, black humor, racist humor, or whatnot. Surely there are people who just lack a taste for Christian humor. What would it *be* to lack a taste for this kind of humor? This question leads to a discussion of the second major characteristic of humor.

2. Perspectivity

My discussion of incongruity has assumed that perception of incongruity is

not just a function of the eyeballs, so to speak, but is a mental event of "perceiving" one thing in terms of another,⁸ two things that fit oddly together. In each of my illustrations of Christian humor, the incongruity is between a piece of what we might call "pagan" behavior, thought, or emotion, and a distinctively Christian view of things. In Christian humor the Christian view of things is taken to be "normal," and the "pagan" behavior, thought, or emotion appears laughable, ludicrous, ridiculous, etc., from this perspective. It is equally possible, and has of course often happened, that the order of the incongruity is reversed, and that what is distinctively Christian looks weird, odd, incongruous, bizarre, absurd, laughable, etc., from the "pagan" perspective.

A sense for the normal is basic to any sense of humor. You won't find anything funny if you don't consider anything to be normal, and this sense for the normal is what constitutes a person's perspective. But I think we can go a little deeper than this, and ask what sort of thing this sense for the normal is. The traditional Christian may answer that it is Christian *beliefs*—beliefs in the sovereignty of God, the sinfulness of man, the doctrine of grace, the stewardship of man, the kingdom of God—that provide this sense of the normal which is at the basis of Christian amusement.

But this response is given the lie by a look at some examples of more everyday humor. Many pieces of humor are funny only from the perspective of someone who speaks a given language. Take for example Erma Bombeck's title that I mentioned earlier: "I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression." The sense of the normal required for appreciating this joke is a sense for two meanings of 'depression': depression as a mood that frequently comes over new mothers, and depression as a period of economic world history in which many people lost everything. Any language that does not possess just *this* ambiguity in one of its terms will not make a very good translation of this joke. If you try to explain this joke to a foreigner who does not speak English very well, it is unlikely that she will be struck with the full force of it. If you tell her that in our language 'depression' has these two meanings, she will be able to see *that* there is something funny here, that the natives laugh at. But unless she has extraordinary powers of linguistic empathy, she will not be struck by this joke the way a native speaker is. The reason is that she lacks what I am calling the sense of the normal from which vantage point this line appears incongruous. But obviously the sense of the normal here is not provided by the *belief* that the word 'depression' has such-and-such meanings. The foreigner believes that as well as the native speaker. The difference between them is rather that the native speaker has a "feel" for the word which allows him to be struck by the incongruity of its being used in these two very different senses at the same time. This has little to do with believing something about the word, and a lot to do with having lived in the language for a while. By analogy one might suggest that the sense of the

normal required for Christian humor is less a function of Christian beliefs, and more a function of a "feel" for the Christian categories. Some believers might be deficient in this "feel," while some unbelievers might have it, and in both cases the "feel" (or lack thereof) will result from how people have lived, in a very broad sense of 'lived.'

One might object that it isn't fair to argue from cases of silly pun-humor to cases of Christian humor. Maybe the perspective from which puns are appreciated is no belief, but it doesn't follow that Christian amusement is not founded on beliefs. Against this objection, however, is a simple observation of religious fact: that some people who believe in the sovereignty of God, the kingdom of God, the sinfulness of man, and so forth, do not have much in the way of a Christian sense of humor; and that some people who do not believe in these things, but do have a "feel" for Christianity, are capable of appreciating Christian humor when it is presented to them. Of course, the solidest mooring in the Christian "sense for the normal" would be to have the Christian beliefs, and also to "live" in these so thoroughly that one effortlessly sees the incongruities they make visible. But the beliefs are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for seeing the Christian incongruities.⁹

I propose to distinguish between having a perspective, owning a perspective, and adopting a perspective. I use each of these expressions in a somewhat contrived sense. By 'adopt a perspective' I mean to make it, or allow it to be, operative in one's perception; but I do not want to stress the *activity* of making or allowing. In my sense of this word we adopt a perspective whenever it is activated in us, whether or not by consent. Thus in this sense we are adopting the perspective of English when amused by the title from Bombeck; we are adopting a "human" perspective when amused by the antics of some chimpanzees; we are adopting the perspectives of both American English and German when we laugh at someone speaking German with a hick-Kansas accent, etc.

To have a perspective, on the other hand, is to be *capable* of adopting it; it is for that perspective to be *available* or *accessible*. To speak English is to have the perspective needed to appreciate the Bombeck title, but I may not, at some moment, be adopting that perspective, because I may be asleep or appreciating a Dutch pun. The perspective provided by my knowing English is not at the moment "engaged," so to speak. A person who has more than a zoo-trip acquaintance with chimpanzees may not always see them as pseudo humans, at which times she will not be adopting the perspective which makes them appear funny. But such a person may not have lost her capacity to see them from that perspective, and so she can be said to have that perspective, even if she does not adopt it very much. A person like this may be able, within certain limits, to adopt the perspective in question *at will*. For example, when she is working with her chimpanzees day-to-day they appear quite

"normal" to her, but when visitors come and point out the pseudo human character of some behavior, she is able to join them in taking again the "human" perspective, and thus in seeing the incongruity and being amused. If she has some interest in the psychology of aspect-switch, she may even sit in her chimp lab practicing switching back and forth between the "human" perspective and the other.

A person owns a perspective when that perspective is natural and habitual, when he not only *can* adopt it, but fairly strongly *tends* to do so. If one speaks English well, one automatically owns the sense of the normal necessary to appreciate Bombeck's title. A person who grows in acquaintance with chimpanzees will gradually cease to own the perspective from which they appear (in the typical way) incongruous, even if she does not cease to have this perspective. *Their* behavior will come to seem normal, and not just the human behavior of which theirs reminds us.

We can now distinguish among kinds of people with respect to a Christian sense of humor. There will be people who do not have the Christian sense of the normal, people who have it but do not own it, and people who own it. The first group do not have a Christian sense of humor at all. We may be able to make them understand ("intellectually") why others find the remark from Merton funny, but they will not themselves find it funny. The second group are persons who would probably not on their own detect the humor in the concept of a moral majority, because they would not adopt the perspective, but once the incongruity is pointed out to them, especially by an able humorist, they adopt the perspective and are amused. The third group are ones for whom the Christian sense of the normal is so natural that they spontaneously or "primitively" perceive the incongruity of, say, feeling self-righteous for giving away 15% of one's income or of trying to secure one's life through insurance and check-ups. It seems obvious that the people in the third group are the ones who have most thoroughly imbibed Christianity. Their sense of humor is "deeply" Christian, and has every right, it seems to me, to be called a Christian virtue.

But it is the second group to which most of us belong, whether we are Christians or not. We are not so thoroughly and primitively entrenched in the Christian perspective that we spontaneously generate Christian amusement, but the perspective is more or less available to us, so we can "get into it" enough to be amused when a Merton or a Kierkegaard or a Chesterton points out the relevant incongruities. If we sit down and make the effort, we may even be able, rather unspontaneously, to construct a bit of Christian humor ourselves.

It seems to me very significant that one can adopt the Christian perspective without owning it. This means that Christian humor is accessible to a wider audience than that of Christian saints. It is accessible to halfway Christians

like most of us in the pews, as well as to persons with no commitment whatsoever to Christianity, provided that they have enough empathic imagination, experience of life, training in cognate world-views, or whatever it takes, to be able to adopt this perspective which is not properly *theirs*. Christian humor is thus a window on Christianity for those who are not fully Christians, in exactly the way that malicious humor is a window on malice for those who are not committed to malice. It is an access to virtues and vices that are not ours, a way of transcending our own character. In the previous section I claimed that a Christian sense of humor is a virtue because it is a form of vision or Christian discernment. The present section has led us to see the capacity for being amused by Christian humor (and this is less than a fully saintly sense of humor) as a form of freedom or potential for self-transcendence toward the things of the Spirit. This is not a Christian virtue, but we might call it a quasi-virtue, or a virtue potential. It is certainly a stage on the way to fully Christian virtues.

Laughing from an alien perspective is not merely an exercise of the imagination, as it were, but something closer to a genuine participation in the Christian perspective. To understand this, and its ethical significance, we must explore the remaining dimensions of amusement.

3. *Dissociation*

When I find something humorous, I dissociate myself from it, even if what I am laughing at is my friend, my children, my lover, or myself. Dissociation is determined by the two facts about amusement that I have just expounded: that it is a perception of *incongruity* from a perspective which is a *sense for the normal*. To see the chimpanzees' antics as incongruous is to see them as something different from my "own," those of my own kind. To laugh at someone speaking German with a hick-Kansas accent is to say, as it were, "I know that's not how it's *really* done." If we laugh at Oscar Wilde's remark that "life is much too important to be taken seriously," it is because we do not take *it* seriously—not, that is, as a literal formula for the truth it expresses. To laugh at Buggy Jerwood's confusion of *αγαπη* and gentlemanliness implies that we view that confusion as alien to our own minds. To be amused is not to dissociate myself from everything about the "object" of amusement. The chimpanzees may be cherished pets, and Buggy Jerwood may be my best friend; and I may acknowledge truth in Wilde's wild remarks. When I laugh at myself, I certainly do not experience complete self-alienation. But I do dissociate myself from what I perceive to be incongruous; this follows from the concept of seeing something as incongruous.

This fact is significant for our analysis. For it means that when I laugh as a Christian (whether or not I am one) I "see," at least for the moment, the pagan perspective as *alien*. This is natural enough in the case where the

laughter at Christian humor is a Christian; it is natural for her to be dissociated from the pagan sense of the normal. But this dissociation becomes interesting where the laughter at Christian humor is not a Christian, or is that partial sort of Christian that most Christians are—one for whom the Christian sense of the normal, though accessible, is not very natural. When one is amused at something that normally seems normal, one is getting a striking glimpse of “another world.” Christian humor is, you might say, on the borderline between Christianity and “paganism.” For you don’t have to be a Christian to enjoy it, and yet to enjoy it is to dissociate yourself, at least momentarily, from your habitual non-Christian perspective. Thus among pagans (whether or not they are church-going) Christian humor is a destabilizing influence.

Let us imagine that Merton was able to get Buggy Jerwood laughing, along with the rest of us, at his confusion. This would take some finesse, precisely because humor is dissociative. When somebody else laughs at us, we know that he is not 100% “with” us—unless, of course, we are laughing at ourselves and thus laughing with him, in which case we are not 100% “with” ourselves, either. We feel that laughter directed at us, even if completely lacking in scorn or derision or contempt, alienates us from the laugher. We feel pushed away, set apart as something that doesn’t belong; and we want to belong. So we don’t like being laughed at, and a humorist who sets out, in the interest of Christianity, to dissociate pagans from their paganism, will need to employ a subtle art.

One way will be to communicate as much as possible to Buggy that he is being laughed at as a friend, as one to whom we are bound with the bonds of affection. This mitigates his sense of alienation from the humorist, making it easier for him to accept the alienation from his own viewpoint, and thus to start laughing at himself. The less the humor sounds like sarcasm, and the more like friendly fun, the better. Another strategy is to get him laughing, not *directly* at himself, but at somebody *like* himself. For those of us who have preached Jerwoodish sermons from time to time, it is easier to laugh at Buggy than to laugh at ourselves, and yet laughing at Buggy can serve a similar purpose: of dissociating us from the practice of making Jerwoodish sermons. The Archie Bunker Show represented Archie’s racial and ethnic bigotry in a consistently comic light, and thus served the moral purpose of dissociating bigots from their bigotry by the complicity of their own laughter. I am sure the laughter (and the associated dissociation) came more easily for Archie’s having played the scapegoat, than it would have if each of those bigots out there on the end of a boottube were subjected, individually, to comic ridicule.

But some people are able to laugh at their own foibles without the mitigation of deflecting the laughter against a scapegoat. They are less “defensive,” better able to tolerate being represented as incongruous, because they have a kind of dissociation built into their character-structure. Since they do not

entirely "identify" with the ridiculous side of them, they are more or less comfortable with being ridiculous. In many virtues-systems, there is no systematic conceptual resource for this dissociation (think of Aristotle, stoicism, secular humanism); the individual's sense of his own identity as a person just *is* more or less his sense of whatever his character is. So if he is to have the self-confidence to laugh at momentous aspects of his own behavior and character, it must be on the basis of either deception (maybe self-deception) or of some personal achievement by comparison with which the incongruities seem to him less significant.

But this is not so in Christianity. Christian psychology, as per the Apostle Paul, strongly promotes dissociation from even the most momentous aspects of our character, thus opening the way for a sense of humor as a Christian virtue. For the Christian scheme acknowledges forthrightly that people (*all* people) are incongruous with their telos (and you won't find a more momentous incongruity than *that!*), while at the same time those who believe in Christ are justified, reborn, have a new nature, etc., which is *not* thus incongruous. Here we have, as it were, two identities: we are what our character is, but beyond this and preëminently we are what God deems us to be and destines us to be; and God's deeming and destining are gracious in Christ. We are sinners, but at the same time righteous by Christ's identifying with us and dwelling in us. We live by his sustaining grace, and not by our own strength. When this dissociation of our true identity from our foible-identity is deeply actualized in the individual personality, it emerges as humility. For humility is the power to be happy and "self"-confident¹⁰ despite some form or other of deficiency, inferiority, or defect. If "deep" humor has mostly to do with human defect—with a person's incongruity respecting his or her telos as human—then it would seem that humility goes hand in hand with a sense of humor about oneself. The Christian theme of dissociation in the "spiritual" person is surely another justification for Kierkegaard's comment that Christianity is the most humorous view of life in world-history. The Christian way of conceiving persons allows, in a specially felicitous way, for that humility without which a person cannot direct important humor against himself. On the other hand, amusement at one's own foibles is an especially powerful form of self-dissociation, and thus of humility. If a Christian sense of humor is a capacity for seeing spiritual incongruities with one's own eyes, and it is important to be able to see those incongruities not just in the "world," but in oneself, then a Christian sense of humor is a deep form of self-knowledge and surely, thus, a Christian virtue.

4. Freshness

To be amused by something is to be *struck* with some incongruity respecting it. When amused by the antics of the chimpanzees, I *see* the incongruity

in their behavior. This is to be sharply contrasted with merely *believing* or *judging* that their behavior differs in specific ways from that of humans, or even *knowing* this. I can come to know how their behavior differs by reading a scientific book on chimpanzee behavior, but this is quite different from the appreciation of the incongruity involved in amusement, which is a direct (though of course perspectival) perception. We can imagine someone reading scientific books on the subject for fifty years, without in this very human way *experiencing* the contrast between chimpanzees and humans. Of course the scientific approach is in some ways superior to being amused by chimpanzees: I may be amused without being very articulate about the differences, or having any explanation of them, and the scientific book may be just what I need to become articulate and explanatory. And the two may be combined: Scientific investigation may give saliency to differences which in their turn become amusing, and amusement might provoke scientific investigation.

I use the word 'freshness' for this dimension of amusement because it comes out most clearly in cases where (because of its absence) we are inclined to say that the humor has gone "stale" for a person. Good jokes have staying power, but I suppose any piece of humor can go stale if repeated enough. If I repeat "Life is much too important to be taken seriously" 100 times a week in various contexts, it is likely to lose its punch for me after a while. The theory of humor that I am offering explains this loss of freshness as a loss of perspective. Wilde's unorthodox use of the word 'seriously' begins to sound normal, and so the perception of incongruity disappears. It is not that I have ceased to know or believe or judge that this use of the word is incongruous, for if asked I can certainly explain why other people are laughing at it; but I have ceased to *hear* it as incongruous, and so have ceased being amused myself. Of course there are ways that my sensitivity to the humor may be resurrected even after death by repetition. In particular it is effective to share the humor with someone who can really appreciate it; it is as though by empathy with my hearer I am freshly reestablished in the needed perspective. My point in this section is just that amusement has this character of perception: to be amused is to "hear" for oneself, to "see" for oneself, some incongruity or other.

Christian amusement too is a *vision* of the incongruities in human behavior, taking the Christian perspective. Flannery O'Connor's very funny and deeply Christian story "Revelation"¹¹ is not only about a "revelation" of sinfulness and fundamental human equality to the bigoted and self-satisfied Mrs. Turpin; it is also a "revelation" to the reader who is amused at Mrs. Turpin's complacent gratitude to Jesus for making her just who she is, neither white trash nor a nigger nor bad-dispositioned nor ugly, but instead a woman with a little of everything. In his amusement at Mrs. Turpin the reader *sees* the incongruity of her bigotry and self-satisfaction. Insofar as such Christian virtues as

compassion, contrition, gratitude, hope, and humility presuppose (or at least are fostered by) the ability to see the incongruity in bigotry and conceit (and not just the belief or knowledge that these are incongruous), amusement at Mrs. Turpin functions as an exercise in Christian virtues.

In the section on perspectivity I pointed out that we can be amused by humor whose sense of the normal is not properly our "own." This means that humor is an access to other perspectives, as long as they are not too distant from one's own: non-sadists can enjoy sadistic humor, non-racists can enjoy racist humor, non-Aristotelians can enjoy Aristotelian humor, non-Christians can enjoy Christian humor. At the end of that section I commented that laughing from an alien perspective is not merely an intellectual exercise, but something nearer to a genuine participation in that perspective. Our discussion of freshness puts us in a position to appreciate this point. For the participation that I spoke of there can now be seen to be a deeply sympathetic "perception." To be amused by O'Connor's story¹² is to put on, for the moment, Christian eyes and something like a Christian heart. I am not, of course, saying that everyone who properly laughs at O'Connor's story has the *Christian* virtue of a sense of humor; for that, presumably, one has to be a fairly highly developed Christian. But O'Connor's power as a humorist is her ability to enable us to visit the Christian perspective which to her, I suspect, is native territory and the basis of her Christian sense of humor.

5. Enjoyment

Of the five features of amusement around which I have organized this essay, I left the most obvious to the last. Amusement is pleasurable. I have two things to say about this.

The moral significance of this fact is that humor draws or seduces us. When we laugh at Mrs. Turpin we dissociate ourselves from her, and consequently from that perspective in which it is quite normal to congratulate ourselves on being less trashy and stupid, and more civilized and compassionate and sophisticated, than some other people that we daily meet. If Mrs. Turpin's, rather than the Christian perspective, is our "own" (and I'd guess it probably is), this dissociation will be painful and something we probably won't volunteer for. And yet we gobble up the story like ice cream, subjecting ourselves to a disturbing alien vision and the frightening possibility of sanctification. This is what I mean by 'seduction,' and it is a great moral power of moral humor. It is equally, I might add, a great power of immoral humor.

Throughout this paper a worry may have nagged the reader's mind. It is no doubt an error to exclude all fun from the Christian life, but the kind of fun that I have claimed for a sense of humor as a Christian virtue seems to be especially perverse. For I have claimed that a sense of humor is a disposition to enjoy some range of incongruities, and that a Christian sense of humor is

especially a disposition to enjoy spiritual incongruities—incongruities between a person's nature as a child of the gospel on the one hand, and his attitudes and behavior on the other. Buggy Jerwood and Mrs. Turpin are comic figures because of their *failure* in one respect or another as children of God. Can one possibly be displaying a Christian virtue in laughing at that sort of thing?

The answer to this question lies in applying the "unity of the virtues" thesis. In its stronger form, this thesis claims that a person cannot have one virtue without having all of them. In a weaker form, it claims that some traits cannot be virtues if separated from certain others. I shall only claim here that the weaker form is true. Being amused at somebody's failure as a human being could not exemplify a virtue¹³ if that were the only attitude one had toward her. But in the Christian personality a sense of humor is grammatically connected with other virtues such as compassion and hope. We can assume (I hope) that Merton's amusement at Buggy Jerwood's confusion about *αγάπη* was suffused with that sense of common humanity and common dependence on the grace of God that Christians call compassion; for if it wasn't, the grammar of the Christian virtues declares that the amusement was not a display of a Christian sense of humor. The grammatical connection, very roughly and briefly, is that the kingdom which provides the perspective from which certain behaviors and attitudes appear incongruous is the object of Christian hope and the model of Christian compassion.

There would be something malicious or at any rate unacceptably frivolous in the enjoyment of people's failures to achieve true humanity if that were the end of the story—if, say, we believe that people are just fundamentally screwed up and then die.

This would be tragedy, not comedy. But the Christian believes in an unspeakable future glory for God's creatures by comparison with which the present defects of his children fade into insignificance. These "tragic" incongruities, which are the subject matter of Christian humor, are thus temporary, and situated by Christian laughter in the larger context of God's mercy and healing. It is because Christians are hopers that they can also be laughers about the most serious things in life. In Flannery O'Connor's story Mrs. Turpin does indeed end by having a "revelation" of the fundamental equality of herself with all the humans she had scorned, and thus a foreshadowing of her rebirth. So we can read the story as a symbol which says that if you're going to laugh at the likes of Mrs. Turpin you'd better remember that you're laughing at yourself too, and that to the enjoyment of laughter is to be added the joy of hope in God that *these* incongruities, at any rate, are not eternal.¹⁴

NOTES

1. See John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New

York Press, 1983), and my response to his arguments, "Smiling With God: Reflections on Christianity and the Psychology of Humor," *Faith and Philosophy* 4, 2:168-175 (1987).

2. *Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Volume 2, translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), § 1681.

3. It should have what I have called a "grammar" which determines its Christian character. See my "Therapies and the Grammar of a Virtue" in Richard H. Bell (ed.), *The Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy and Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

4. Readers of earlier drafts of this paper have repeatedly complained that while I perhaps show some interesting connections between humor/amusement and the Christian life, I do not show that a sense of humor can be a *Christian virtue*. I can start by saying that my concept of a virtue is liberal. A virtue is a trait that makes a person a good specimen. Traits that make people good as human beings are human virtues; traits that make them good as moral beings are moral virtues; traits that make them good as Christians are Christian virtues. Intelligence is a human virtue; when it is trained into moral discernment it is a moral virtue; when it is trained into Christian discernment it is a Christian virtue. The latter is a Christian virtue not just when it is joined to and in aid of the Christian life, but because the discernment itself is shaped by the Christian story and its concepts. On the other hand, I do think that some moral virtues are moral more or less only by association with other virtues: e.g., courage is a moral virtue only when associated with virtues such as justice and compassion, because courage can be used for immoral purposes. To have a virtue is to meet some requirement of some ideal—of what it is to be human, moral, Christian, or whatever. So I don't feel bound, in picking out virtues, to limit myself to traits with official names—such as the Christian ones that occur in various lists in the New Testament. (I do think, though, that most of the important ones have names.) My concept of a virtue is liberal in another way. I reject a tendency in the literature to think that to be a virtue a trait must meet certain requirements as to psychological type. It is sometimes said that a virtue must be seated in the "will." This may mean a variety of things. It may mean that virtues are the sort of dispositions that desires and aversions are. Or it may mean that virtues are variants of our powers to choose courses of action. Either of these conditions would seem to exclude a sense of humor as a virtue, but they also neglect the fact that the good life is more than motive and action; it is also "vision." Sometimes the claim that virtues are all determinants of the will is used to deny that any virtues are skill-like capacities, as I take courage and self-control to be, or that such personality-styles as friendliness and gentleness are virtues. Rather than accept these exclusions, I prefer to deny or qualify the statement that all virtues are determinants of the will. Aristotle claims that all virtues are dispositions to feel pleasure, and to experience passions in just the right way. I have argued against such restrictions in some papers. See "Will Power and the Virtues," *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984), 227-247, reprinted in R. Kruschwitz and R. Roberts (eds.) *The Virtues* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1986) and Christina Sommers (ed.) *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*, second edition (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989), "Aristotle On Virtues and Emotions," *Philosophical Studies*, 55 (1989), 121-34 and "Virtues and Emotions" unpublished manuscript. In my view all that it takes to show that a trait is a Christian virtue, is that it can be stable, draws on fairly

central distinctive features of the Christian tradition, and makes a person better as a Christian.

5. In English, 'amusement' sometimes refers to our state of mind of being happily occupied in some interesting activity. Throughout this paper I use the word to denote only the state of mind that occurs in response to humorous situations and presentations.

6. See Morreall, *op. cit.* In the present essay I have kept to a minimum the direct discussion of my basic concepts (virtue, perception of incongruity, perspectivity, dissociation, etc.), in the interest of writing fairly economically about humor and amusement in their *Christian* connections. For more on these concepts, see the other essays I refer to in the notes, as well as my "Humor and the Virtues," *Inquiry* 31, 2 (1988).

7. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), p. 74.

8. For a discussion of this kind of mental event, which I call "construal," in the context of a theory of emotion, see my "What An Emotion Is: A Sketch," *Philosophical Review* 97 (April 1988). On differences and similarities between amusement and emotions, see my "Is Amusement An Emotion?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25, 3 (July 1988).

9. More on the independence of amusement from beliefs can be found in section 2 of "Humor and the Virtues," where I argue against Ronald de Sousa's claim that the appreciation of e.g., sexist jokes requires believing propositions of sexist ideology.

10. As I argued in *Spirituality and Human Emotion* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), chapter 4.

11. Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971).

12. To be more precise about this, note that there are countless ways to be "amused by O'Connor's story." A literary philistine might think the story poorly written, and laugh at its pretensions to be literature. Another might laugh at what he takes to be the naughtiness of the word 'nigger' in the mouths of some of the characters. None of this silliness would, of course, be a participation in the Christian perspective. So when I speak of being "amused by O'Connor's story," I mean roughly "being amused by what O'Connor intends to amuse us by in the story."

13. I responded, in endnote 4, to two grounds for doubting that a Christian sense of humor is a Christian virtue: that it is not traditionally named among the Christian virtues, and that it is not seated in the "will." My argument that it is a virtue because it is a form of Christian "seeing," and because, when self-directed, it is a form of humility, may raise a third objection. It may be said that while a Christian sense of humor is *virtuous*, I have still not shown that it is *a virtue*; for, by my own admission, it is a form of other virtues, namely Christian discernment and Christian humility. This objection raises the question of how to individuate virtues, a question to which I do not have a general answer. But it is clear that a Christian sense of humor is not identical with either Christian discernment or Christian humility, or both. It is instead a *form* of each of these, and indeed an optional form: a person could have a lot of discernment and humility without having much sense of humor. Besides this, it seems to me distinctive enough to warrant status as a separate virtue. If someone insists that it is not a virtue, but only a particular form that a couple of other virtues can take, I shall not quibble. But I would point out that treating the "parts" of virtues as virtues is not new: Aquinas distinguishes "principal" virtues from their

“annexed” virtues, or “potential parts.” For example, he treats gratitude and truthfulness as “parts” of justice, and yet also as separate virtues. See *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae 80.

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