

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 32 | Issue 3

Article 2

7-1-2015

Does God Have a Sense of Humor?

Rik Peels

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Peels, Rik (2015) "Does God Have a Sense of Humor?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil20157742

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol32/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

DOES GOD HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR?

Rik Peels

This paper provides a defense of the thesis that God has a sense of humor. First, I sketch the four main theories of what it is to have a sense of humor that we find in the literature. Next, I argue that three arguments against the thesis that God has a sense of humor fail to convince. Then, I consider what one might take to be four *biblical* reasons to think that God has a sense of humor and argue that none of them are convincing. Subsequently, I give three *philosophical* reasons to think that God (if he exists) has a sense of humor, that is, reasons that any person who grasps the concept of God should be willing to embrace. These arguments differ in strength, but I argue that, jointly, they provide us with sufficient reason to think that God has a sense of humor. Finally, I spell out three implications of the idea that God has a sense of humor.

“Creatures, I give you yourselves,” said the strong, happy voice of Aslan. “I give to you forever this land of Narnia. I give you the woods, the fruits, the rivers. I give you the stars and I give you myself. The Dumb Beasts whom I have not chosen are yours also. Treat them gently and cherish them but do not go back to their ways lest you cease to be Talking Beasts. For out of them you were taken and into them you can return. Do not so.” “No, Aslan, we won’t, we won’t,” said everyone. But one perky jackdaw added in a loud voice, “No fear!” and everyone else had finished just before he said it so that his words came out quite clear in a dead silence; and perhaps you have found out how awful that can be—say, at a party. The Jackdaw became so embarrassed that it hid its head under its wings as if it was going to sleep. And all the other animals began making various queer noises which are their ways of laughing and which, of course, no one has ever heard in our world. They tried at first to repress it, but Aslan said: “Laugh and fear not, creatures. Now that you are no longer dumb and witless, you need not always be grave. For jokes as well as justice come in with speech.” So they all let themselves go. And there was such merriment that the Jackdaw himself plucked up courage again and perched on the cab-horse’s head, between its ears, clapping its wings,



and said: "Aslan! Aslan! Have I made the first joke? Will everybody always be told how I made the first joke?" "No, little friend," said the Lion. "You have not made the first joke; you have only been the first joke." —C. S. Lewis, *"The First Joke and Other Matters,"* in *The Magician's Nephew*¹

1. Introduction

Most divine properties discussed by philosophers and theologians are attributes such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omnipresence. The majority of them agree that if there is a God, he has these properties, even though they do not always agree on how these properties are to be spelled out. Unfortunately but understandably, the discussion about these properties has been so lengthy and energy-consuming that there has been little attention for what one could call the more controversial attributes of God, attributes such that it is controversial whether God even has them. Here, we can think of such properties as being jealous, being disappointed, being patient, suffering, and repenting.² The topic of this paper is one of those attributes, namely having a sense of humor. The aim of this paper is to answer the question whether God has a sense of humor.

This is an important question for at least three reasons. First, ancient Greek philosophers have been rather critical toward humor³ and this has influenced the views of later theologians and theistic philosophers.⁴ Over the course of the last few centuries, though, philosophers have become more and more positive about humor. This gives us good reason to reconsider the question whether God has a sense of humor. Second, theists, especially Christians, believe that humans have been created in the image of God. What that image amounts to has usually been spelled out in terms of such things as free will and rationality. If, however, God has a sense of humor, then humans are more similar to God in another regard that has been overlooked. Finally, one's view on whether or not God has a sense of humor might influence certain religious practices (such as prayer).

¹London: Bodley Head, 1955. I thank Arnold and Joke van Heusden for drawing my attention to this wonderful passage.

²For a discussion of divine repentance, see Rik Peels, "Does God Repent?," in *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, Volume 7, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), forthcoming.

³See, for example, Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 151 (§2.12); Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 1975), 309–310 (§7.816); *The Republic*, trans. R. E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 74 (§III.388e).

⁴For examples that illustrate this point, see John Morreall, "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987); "Philosophy of Humor," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor>, first published November 20th 2012, last visited March 9th 2015.

I take it that having a sense of humor is having a particular disposition. The stimulus conditions are humorous situations or, at least, situations that the subject in question deems humorous. The manifestation of the disposition is to be amused. Such amusement may be expressed by smiling or laughing, but, as we know, it need not be expressed, for we can be amused by situations without letting anyone know that we are. It is not necessary for having a sense of humor, then, that one makes others laugh in some way or other; it suffices that one can appreciate, experience, or see certain situations as humorous.

When we think of humor, we enter a large conceptual space: jokes, laughter, amusement, ridicule, irony, wit, mockery, jest, parody, satire, slapstick, buffoonery, farces, folly, the comic, and the ludicrous. I think it is justified to focus on (having a sense of) humor as the core of this conceptual realm. For we think of laughter, jokes, farces, and irony as *expressions* of a sense of humor, we consider parody and satire written or spoken as *products* of a person's sense of humor, and we take the comic, the ludicrous, and folly as (often good) *occasions* for expressing one's sense of humor.

The paper is structured as follows. First, in Section 2, I sketch the four main theories of what it is to have a sense of humor that we find in the literature. The aim of this section is *not* to defend a particular account of humor; that would require another paper, if not more. Rather, the purpose is to get a firmer grip on which accounts have been given and to use those accounts in the ensuing sections in order to see whether on those accounts God has a sense of humor. Then, in Section 3, I argue that three objections to the idea that God has a sense of humor are unconvincing. Next, in Section 4, I spell out four *biblical* reasons that might be taken to provide evidence in favor of the claim that God has a sense of humor, at least for those who believe that the Bible gives a reliable testimony about the nature of God. I argue that none of them are convincing. Subsequently, in Section 5, I discuss three *philosophical* reasons to think that God has a sense of humor. By "philosophical reasons" I mean reasons that any person who grasps the concept of God could embrace, independently of whether or not she believes that God has revealed himself or even that he exists. I present them in order of increasing strength and argue that, jointly, they provide us with sufficient reason to think that God has a sense of humor. Finally, in Section 6, I spell out three implications of the idea that God has a sense of humor.

2. What Is It to Have a Sense of Humor?

In this section, I sketch the four main theories of what it is to have a sense of humor that we find in the literature: the superiority, incongruity, relief, and play theories.⁵ Let me make two preliminary remarks. First, I am *not* assuming that these theories are unproblematic. One might think,

⁵For a description of the first three of these, see also John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), 4–37; "Philosophy of Humor."

for instance, that the phenomena these theories describe are much more plausibly interpreted as *causes of* or *occasions for* being amused, since, say, feeling superior or seeing an incongruity as such does not imply that one is amused. Since these four theories are the main theories that we find in the literature, though, I will go on to describe them for use in subsequent arguments. Second, these accounts have sometimes been presented as *rival* accounts, but many philosophers today take them to be complementary accounts. For one thing, they do not always analyze the exact same thing; they answer different questions.⁶ For another, they often provide necessary *or* sufficient conditions rather than necessary *and* sufficient conditions for having a sense of humor.

1. The first theory is the so-called *superiority theory*. The basic idea of this theory is that being amused or laughing, as a manifestation or expression of a sense of humor, is or expresses a feeling of superiority over other people or over an earlier time slice of oneself. For example, people are sometimes amused when they see someone's clumsy behavior, such as when someone accidentally knocks over his cup of coffee twice. Aristotle, Baudelaire, and Roger Scruton have defended this theory in one form or another.⁷ The main advocate of this theory, though, is Thomas Hobbes. In his *Human Nature*, he writes:

I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour. It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over.⁸

The superiority theory has received a lot of criticism. According to Aaron Smuts, a feeling of superiority is not necessary for having a sense of humor, and Francis Hutcheson has argued that it is not sufficient.⁹ What seems rather uncontroversial, though, is that at least *some* instances of

⁶As Aaron Smuts rightly points out, theories of humor answer different questions: (a) What is it to have a sense of humor? (b) What is characteristic or essential for something being humorous? (c) Is there something psychologically or cognitively distinctive about being amused by something? (d) How does laughter relate to humor? See Aaron Smuts, "Humor," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor/>, originally published April 20th 2006, last revised April 12th 2009, last visited March 9th 2015.

⁷Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 102–104 (§IV.8); Charles Baudelaire, *The Essence of Laughter and Other Essays, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Peter Quennell (New York: Meridian Books, 1956); Roger Scruton, "Laughter," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 168.

⁸Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes Volume 4*, ed. William Molesworth (Aalen: Scientia, 1962), 46.

⁹Smuts, "Humor"; Francis Hutcheson, "From *Reflections Upon Laughter*," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 29.

being amused at something or someone are accompanied by (mild) feelings of superiority.

2. The second theory of humor is the *relief theory*. It is important to note that this theory is now widely considered to be a theory of *laughter*, where laughter is an *expression of* humor. Or, put slightly more precisely, the relief theory is a theory of *some kinds of* laughter—after all, there are also non-humorous instances of laughter, such as laughter due to tickling or laughter resulting from embarrassment. According to this theory, to be amused at something is to feel relief from a certain kind of tension or nervousness, usually a physical or psychological tension. Laughter is the venting of nervous energy. According to adherents of this theory, humans laugh, for instance, in response to jokes about sex or violence, since all cultures forbid certain activities with regard to sex and violence and even make restrictions on when sex or (particular kinds of) violence are talked about. This leads to a kind of repressed energy that is released in laughter when forbidden comments are made or forbidden thoughts are called up. Among the adherents of this theory are Herbert Spencer and John Dewey.¹⁰ It might not be a relief for some readers to hear that the best-known defender of the theory is Sigmund Freud. Says Freud:

Humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts itself in their place. The conditions for its appearance are given if there is a situation in which, according to our usual habits, we should be tempted to release a distressing affect and if motives then operate upon us which suppress that affect *in statu nascendi*.¹¹

It is not clear that the adherents of the relief theory have provided an account that distinguishes humorous from non-humorous laughter. After all, laughter that is produced by tickling or inhaling laughing gas may also result from a relief of tension.¹² Nonetheless, it seems undeniable that laughter is an important way to express one's sense of humor and that laughter is often accompanied by or issues from a relief of tension.

3. Third, there is the *incongruity theory*. Its core idea is that to have a sense of humor is to have a disposition to be amused at something incongruous, where incongruity includes ambiguity, irrelevance, logical impossibility, and inappropriateness. These are things that can amuse one because they violate one's mental patterns and expectations. Here, we can think, for instance, of absurd subtitles for the famous bunker scene with Hitler in the movie *Downfall*. In many YouTube versions, Hitler finds out

¹⁰See Herbert Spencer, "On the Physiology of Laughter," in *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects* (London: Dent, 1976), 298–309; John Dewey, "The Theory of Emotion. (I) Emotional Attitudes," *Psychological Review* 1 (1894), 558–560.

¹¹Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Volume VII (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), 228–229.

¹²As Smuts, "Humor," points out.

and rants about the re-election of Obama, the new iPad, or the fact that his pizza will arrive late, something that is clearly incongruous and something that many people apparently find funny.

Cicero, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, Michael Clark, John Morreall, and many contemporary philosophers and psychologists defend some variety of the incongruity theory.¹³ In fact, in the contemporary philosophical and psychological literature, it seems to be the dominant theory of what it is to have a sense of humor. Arthur Schopenhauer gives a clear statement of the theory when he says:

In every case, *laughter* arises from nothing other than the sudden perception of an incongruity between a concept and the real objects that are, in some respect, thought through the concept; in fact laughter itself is simply the expression of this incongruity. . . . All laughter is occasioned by a paradoxical and hence unexpected subsumption, irrespective of whether it is expressed in words or deeds.¹⁴

Of course, the theory needs refinement. As many have pointed out, we laugh at some incongruities, but not at others. There is nothing funny about a paper displaying a list of propositions and their negations—which is not to deny that there may be something funny about someone laughing upon reading such a weird list. However, the incongruity theory is clearly right in that many cases of incongruity are occasions for laughter as an expression of one's sense of humor.¹⁵

4. The final theory, which is often neglected in the literature because it has few proponents, is the *play theory*. The idea is that humor is an *extension of animal play* or a *variety of human play*. Adherents are Max Eastman, Conrad Hyers,¹⁶ and Thomas Aquinas. The last is rather positive about humor: "Now such like words or deeds wherein nothing further is sought than the soul's delight, are called playful or humorous. Hence it is necessary

¹³Marcus Tullius Cicero, "On the Orator," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 17–18; Michael Clark, "Humor and Incongruity," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 139–155; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 207–2012 (§I.1.54); Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 430–439 (§2.2.5). For incongruity accounts by psychologists, see many of the essays in *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, ed. Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (London: John Wiley, 1976).

¹⁴Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway, Volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 84 (§I.13).

¹⁵We can consider John Morreall's idea that laughter is experiencing a pleasant cognitive shift, often accompanied by a pleasant emotional shift, as a combination of several elements of the three theories that I have discussed so far, especially the incongruity theory (see Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 38–59).

¹⁶See Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), 15–16; M. Conrad Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," *Cross Currents* 19, 70–71.

at times to make use of them."¹⁷ This defense of the importance of humor may come as surprise for someone who has worked through the *Summa Theologica*. But Aquinas even goes so far as to say that the person who is never playful or humorous is acting "against reason" and so is guilty of a vice. According to many of the authors who embrace a play theory, such as Eastman, humor is a variety of play because one takes a disinterested attitude toward what might otherwise be seen as serious. Unfortunately, they fail to give examples that can serve to give us a better grip on what variety of play humor is.

This theory raises all sorts of questions. If a sense of humor, or perhaps rather the *expression* of a sense of humor, is a variety of play, then exactly which variety of play is it? How is it to be distinguished from other kinds of play? And should we not understand play partly in terms of humor and amusement rather than vice versa?

However, all we need to notice for our purposes is that there does indeed seem to be a particular relation between humor and play: playing is usually rather amusing. In fact, playing that is not in any way amusing seems often at least somewhat annoying—even though everyone knows how serious some people can be about games and how amusement at those people's seriousness can give rise to all sorts of emotions that one wishes to avoid when one plays a game.

3. Three Arguments against the View that God Has a Sense of Humor

In this section I formulate and reply to three arguments *against* the thesis that God has a sense of humor. The first two objections are based respectively on ideas that we find in the literature about humor and God's awareness of suffering, whereas the third objection has itself been presented in the literature.¹⁸

First Argument. Some philosophers, such as Aaron Smuts,¹⁹ argue or at least claim that what one finds humorous or funny is entirely subjective. There are no facts about what is and what is not funny, only facts about what is and what is not funny *for someone*. But if whether or not something is humorous is merely subjective, then why should we think that God, who is perfectly good and omniscient, has a sense of humor?

¹⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume 4 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), 1872 (ST 2a2ae Q. 168, art. 2).

¹⁸Another objection might be that amusement is or entails an emotion (e.g., Robert Sharpe, "Seven Reasons Why Amusement Is an Emotion," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987], 208–211) and that God cannot have emotions, since God is impassible. Since whether or not God has emotions is a large topic that has received a lot of attention and that I cannot do justice to in a single paper, I will not discuss this objection here. For a recent defense of the idea that God can have emotions, see Anastasia Philippa Scrutton, *Thinking through Feeling: God, Emotion and Passibility* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

¹⁹See Aaron Smuts, "The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor be Wrong?," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13 (2010), 333–347.

For two reasons, I do not find this argument convincing. First, it does not follow from the fact that people hold widely different views about what is funny that what *is* funny is purely subjective. People at least partly hold widely different views about what is morally right and wrong and even more widely different views about what is beautiful and what is ugly. However, there have been many philosophers who are aware of these facts and yet are moral or aesthetic realists. So why could one not acknowledge that people's feelings for and ideas about humor widely differ, and still believe that there are objective facts about what is funny and what is not?

Second, even if it is a purely subjective matter what one finds funny and what one does *not* find funny, it does not follow that God has no sense of humor. For, obviously, God might have his own subjective sense of humor. Of course, as many philosophers have acknowledged, there is a moral dimension to humor: certain kinds of jokes seem morally wrong.²⁰ God, being perfectly good, would have no perverted sense of humor. But that seems compatible with its being subjective; there might be others—actually or potentially—who find different things funny without there being anything morally wrong about their sense of humor.

Second Argument. Next, one may claim that we are amused at things only because we can temporarily focus on funny things, while our knowledge and memory of terrible experiences and all the evil in the world are not on our minds. But God is omniscient, so he will be constantly aware of all the suffering in the world. How, then, could he ever be amused? Linda Zagzebski has even argued that God is omnsubjective—that for everything anyone feels or experiences, God has a perfect first-person grasp of that feeling or experience.²¹ This seems to make the problem even larger.

I think at least two things need to be said in response. First, we should remember that having a sense of humor is a *disposition*. If God is everlasting—that is, in time, but without beginning or end—rather than eternal—that is, beyond time—then he might well have been amused *before* there was evil in reality and, if, say, universalism or annihilationism is true, he may well be amused again when all evil has been removed from his creation. Second, as Roberts has suggested,²² it may be that part of God's knowledge is dispositional rather than occurrent. If that is the case, then God can temporarily focus on certain events and, maybe, be amused by them.

Third Argument. Finally, according to John Morreall, if God is omniscient, he *cannot be surprised by any incongruity*. Clearly, this objection depends on the viability of the incongruity theory. It also depends on how "incongruity"

²⁰See, for instance, Ronald De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 275–299, and Berys Gaut, "Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor," *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998), 51–68.

²¹See Linda Zagzebski, "Omnisubjectivity," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig, Volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 231–247.

²²See Robert C. Roberts, "Smiling with God: Reflections on Christianity and the Psychology of Humor," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987), 168–175.

is defined. Here is how Morreall himself defines the notion: “a relation of conflict between something we perceive, remember, or imagine, on the one hand, and our conceptual patterns with their attendant expectations, on the other.”²³ According to Morreall, enjoying the incongruity, rather than having a negative emotion toward it or trying to understand the situation, is characteristic of amusement. Given that God is omniscient, however, his expectations cannot be violated by incongruities. Hence, God cannot have a sense of humor:

[T]he Christian God could have no sense of humor. He knows fully every thing 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; he could not experience the psychological shift that is behind laughter.²⁴

For three reasons, I do not find this argument convincing.

First, according to open theists, the future is open to God: God does not know what his creatures will freely do in the future.²⁵ Nonetheless, God is omniscient. Some open theists, such as Alan Rhoda, Gregory Boyd, and Thomas Belt, claim that God is omniscient because he knows all true propositions and there are no truths about what God’s creatures will freely do in the future.²⁶ According to other open theists, such as William Hasker, God is omniscient because, even though there *are* truths about what God’s creatures will freely do in the future, it is *not* possible to know those truths, and to be omniscient is to know everything that it is possible to know—a condition that God satisfies.²⁷ If open theism is correct, then certain incongruities will come as a surprise to God, and this third objection will fail.

Second, even if the future is fully known by God, including the future free actions of his creatures, he will know what the future is only once he has decided which actions he will perform himself (which possible world he will actualize). Before deciding which possible world to actualize, God knows which incongruities are possible and which ones would result from which actions of his and his creatures, but he does *not* yet know which ones will be *actual*. And, clearly, we are usually much more amused at *actual* incongruities than at merely *possible* incongruities. Hence, there is surprise for God in the sense that only once he has decided which possible

²³Morreall, “Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity,” 188–189.

²⁴Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 126.

²⁵For more on open theism, see Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, and William Hasker, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

²⁶See, for example, Alan Rhoda, Gregory A. Boyd, and Thomas Belt, “Open Theism, Omniscience, and the Nature of the Future,” *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006), 432–459.

²⁷See, for instance, William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 186–205.

world to actualize, he comes to know which incongruities *are or will be actual*. This means that if God is and always has been in time, God might well be amused at some point, and that if God is timeless, God might well be eternally amused.

Third and most importantly, it seems implausible that surprise is a necessary condition for being amused. We may laugh at the same joke again and again. Perceiving incongruity for the second, third, or even tenth time can still evoke a feeling of amusement in us. But if this applies to us, why would it not apply to God? Why could God not be amused at some incongruity again and again? Maybe fresh perception is required for being amused, but surely God, being omnipotent, can keep his perceptions of incongruity as fresh as possible.²⁸

I conclude that none of the three arguments considered in this section provides us with a good reason to think that God lacks a sense of humor.

4. Four Biblical Arguments for the View that God Has a Sense of Humor

Let us now turn to arguments *in favor of* the thesis that God has a sense of humor. For those who accept the Bible as a reliable testimony about God, is there any biblical reason to think that God has a sense of humor? In this section, I present four arguments in favor of this view. None of them commits us to any particular theory of humor, but, as we shall see, the phenomena that play a crucial role in the four theories of humor that I sketched above are easily recognizable in many of the Bible quotations that I give. I will argue that neither individually nor jointly do they provide us with sufficient reason to think that God has a sense of humor.

First Argument. First, there are a few passages in the Bible that say *expressis verbis* that God laughs at something or someone. Most famous is Psalm 2:1–4:

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, "Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles." The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.

Surely, one might think, there is something funny about the situation described here. If God exists, then, presumably, he is omniscient, necessarily existent, perfectly good, omnipotent, and the creator of the entire universe. And here we have a couple of people on earth who intend to take it up against the author of the cosmos. That, it seems, is just ridiculous. The idea of (vast) superiority is clearly present in this passage. Similar statements about God's being amused about the pretentiousness of human beings are found in Psalm 59:8 (the Lord laughs and scoffs at the nations that reject him) and Psalm 37:13 (God laughs at the wicked).

However, I do not think that passages like these provide a good reason to think that God has a sense of humor. They cannot be understood literally,

²⁸Thus also Roberts, "Smiling with God," 174.

for laughing seems to be a bodily action, which includes opening one's mouth and producing certain sounds, and on a classical, Anselmian conception of God, God is immaterial. God cannot laugh in the same way as God cannot be literally enthroned. But then, could this passage not be understood metaphorically, in the same way as God's being enthroned ought to be understood metaphorically? This is quite possible, but it is *not* clear why the metaphor of laughing should be understood as conveying the idea that God has a sense of humor rather than some other idea about God, such as the idea that God is vastly superior to humans or the idea that God knows that it is senseless to conspire against him. I conclude that this passage does not provide us with good reason to think that God has a sense of humor.

Second Argument. Next, *key figures representing God use humor*, even in highly serious situations, and there is no indication in the Bible that God disapproves of that. When there is a contest between Baal and God on Mount Carmel, in order to see who is the true God, the prophets of Baal call Baal's name and ask him to light the sacrifice. 1 Kings 18: 26b–27 then reads:

But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened."²⁹

The idea of superiority is clearly recognizable here, and maybe even the idea of incongruity—being too busy or being travelling is not really the sort of thing we associate with being a god.

Another person in the Bible with a sense of humor is the apostle Paul. When he faces a trial before procurator Festus and King Agrippa, the latter rhetorically asks whether Paul thinks that he can persuade Agrippa in such a short time to become a Christian. Paul replies:

Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains. (Acts 26: 29)

And in Galatians 5:11–12, Paul replies as follows to the accusation that he still preaches circumcision:

Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

Mockery and irony, as expressions of a sense of humor, are clearly present in these passages. Now, of course, from the fact that someone who represents God ϕ -s and, for all we know, God does not disapprove of her ϕ -ing, it does *not* follow that God himself ϕ -s. After all, those same people ate, drank, slept, and did all sorts of other things that God, presumably,

²⁹Bible quotations are from the *New International Version*.

does not do. Here, one might think, the situation is different, though. For, in speaking these words, these key figures are representing God and are conferring God's message. The situation is often rather critical—a competition between God and idols, Paul's facing a trial and potentially death, and the church's being divided on the necessity of circumcision. (This is partly what makes these scenarios humorous: the incongruity between the seriousness of the situation and the down-to-earth way the subjects in question deal with it.) In these pernicious circumstances, God speaks via specifically appointed people and in proclaiming God's message, these people use humor. I will discuss this argument and the following two arguments at the end of this section, because they face the same worry.

Third Argument. God himself also performs certain actions that seem to express a sense of humor. Take the following story from 1 Samuel 5:1–5:

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained.

God, if he is omnipotent, could easily have smashed the statue to pieces or simply made it vanish. But rather than doing that, he has it fall on its face. When Dagon is put back in his place, God performs the same action again, this time breaking Dagon's head and hands off. By playing with it in this way, God shows how utterly foolish it is to revere a statue made out of lifeless matter, unable as it is even to stand on its own feet. Elements of superiority and playfulness seem present in these events.

Another example of what one might think of as God's sense of humor is the way he deals with his rather recalcitrant and irascible prophet Jonah. When Jonah preaches to the inhabitants of Nineveh that God will destroy the city, they repent, and God spares the city. Rather than rejoicing in it, Jonah becomes angry and sits down east of the city, hoping that the city will nonetheless somehow be destroyed. The story continues as follows:

Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead." But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?" (Jonah 4:6–11)

Rather than condemning Jonah's unwarranted desire for revenge and punishment, God uses a gentle and humorous pedagogical method—the growing of the plant and its analogy with the city—to explain his decision to Jonah.

Fourth Argument. Finally, on orthodox Christian theology, Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God and reveals the nature of God to us. Now, there are several occasions at which Jesus seems to make fun of his conversation partners. Jesus, in blaming the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, expresses his irony when he says in Matthew 23:24: “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” And in another situation he ironically criticizes the hypocrisy of some of his listeners:

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? (Matthew 7:3)³⁰

The way Jesus outwits the Pharisees time and again will make most readers smile.³¹

The problem with the second, third, and fourth arguments is that the evidence adduced provides us with good reason for thinking that God *employs* humor to bring a certain message to human beings, knowing that they (or at least some of them) will be amused at it, *not* for thinking that God himself has a sense of humor. One need not have a sense of humor oneself in order to employ it for certain purposes, in the same way as an autistic person can use certain kinds of jokes or a psychopath can display behavior that to others might seem to be the expression of a sense of humor or of an emotion. It could be that prophets, apostles, Jesus, and God the Father say or do things that humans will find humorous, because God knows that it will have those effects, without God himself ever being amused at anything.³²

One may object that for autistic persons to use humor without being amused themselves and for psychopaths to seemingly display emotions without having any emotions is clearly a *deficiency* in that these people lack certain valuable capabilities that properly functioning persons have, whereas God, being perfect, is not deficient in any regard and would not

³⁰It is precisely because of such disputes of Jesus with the religious establishment of his time that Thomas Cahill talks about the “wry and smiling Jesus” and his “laughing victory” (Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus* [New York: Anchor, 2001], 280).

³¹Thus Michael Rogness, “Humor in the Bible,” *Word and World* 32 (2012), 121; see also Marcian Strange, “God and Laughter,” *Worship* 45 (1971), 4–5. They give numerous other examples of humor in the Bible, including many instances of representatives of God and God himself using humor.

³²Note that there is no instance in the Gospels where Jesus is said to be amused, smile, or laugh. But even if there were, it would only follow that an *incarnate* God has a sense of humor, in the same way that it seems that an *incarnate* God—or, at least, a God who incarnated in a human being—would have a body temperature, a certain number of limbs, a heart, and so on, even though a *non-incarnate* God would not.

lack any valuable capability. The problem is that autism and being a psychopath are deficiencies in that normal *humans* have these capacities: they have a sense of humor and they can feel emotions. It does *not* follow that they are capacities *any* personal being, including God, will have. Therefore, there is insufficient reason to think on the basis of these biblical texts that God has a sense of humor.

5. Three Philosophical Arguments for the View that God Has a Sense of Humor

In this section, I evaluate three *philosophical* arguments to think that God has a sense of humor. They do not rely on any spoken or written revelation, such as the Bible, but assume only the classical Anselmian conception of God as a perfect being. I present them in order of what I consider to be increasing strength.

First Argument. First, it seems that God satisfies the conditions of several theories of having a sense of humor that I sketched in Section 2. One theory does not apply to God, but that turns out to be no problem, for it is plausibly interpreted as a theory of laughter rather than a theory of having a sense of humor; for another theory, it is not clear whether or not God meets the conditions laid out in it; and for the two remaining theories, it seems that God meets the conditions that they spell out for having a sense of humor.

Let us first consider the *relief* theory. God is traditionally understood to be bodiless, and laughing is, presumably, a bodily action, so the relief theory simply does not apply to God: he neither meets nor violates the conditions it spells out for having a sense of humor. Obviously, it does *not* follow that God has no sense of humor, since laughter is only one among several ways to express one's sense of humor. Also, we can be amused at something without laughing about it or expressing our amusement in some other way, for instance, because we do not want others to know that we are amused at it. This theory, therefore, does not tell us anything about whether or not God has a sense of humor.

Next, let us consider the *play* theory. It is not clear whether God satisfies the conditions laid out in this theory, if only because the play theory has not been spelled out in sufficient detail in the literature. Of course, on traditional theology, God created animals and humans and both animals and humans love to play. It does *not* follow, though, that God himself loves play. Human beings love (good) food, as do animals, and there is no reason to think that God disapproves of food, but it does not follow that God himself loves food. Without some further argument, then, it is not clear whether or not God meets the conditions laid out by the play theory.³³

Now, let us turn to the *superiority* theory. Being a perfect being, God is clearly superior to any created being. In fact, being omniscient, God will

³³There are several texts in the Bible that say or imply that God plays: Job 40:29; Psalm 104:26; Proverbs 8:30–31. It is not clear, though, whether these texts should be interpreted literally.

know that he is. If having a sense of humor or if being amused is the awareness of being superior, then surely God will have a sense of humor, given that he *is* (vastly) superior to any other being and knows that he is. One may object that having a sense of humor cannot consist in feeling superior or knowing that one is superior, since one can clearly feel superior and know that one is superior without being amused by that superiority. This, however, would amount to an objection to the superiority theory and, as I said above, I cannot discuss the main theories of having a sense of humor in any detail here. All I am saying is that *if* this theory is correct, there is good reason to think that God has a sense of humor.

Finally, being omniscient, God knows about every *incongruity*: any irrelevance, or logical contradiction in what people claim, and any inappropriateness will be completely and perfectly known by him. On this theory as well, then, God will have a sense of humor.

Therefore, out of the four main theories of having a sense of humor, one does not apply to God but is plausibly taken as a theory of laughter rather than having a sense of humor; God neither clearly meets nor clearly violates the conditions laid out in a second theory; and God meets the conditions of the third and fourth theories. It seems, then, that this provides us with at least *some* reason to think that God has a sense of humor, even though it would be good to have other reasons, since this reason is fairly weak. I will go on to present two such reasons below.

Second Argument. The second argument starts with the following rather uncontroversial premise:

- (1) Having a sense of humor is a *good-making property* for human beings.

This does not seem to need much by way of defense: surely, *ceteris paribus*, we prefer someone with a sense of humor over someone without a sense of humor. In fact, when asked what we deem most important in relationships with other persons, the attribute of humor is usually in the top five.³⁴ The second premise is as follows:

- (2) For any property *P*, if *P* is a good-making property for entity *X* and *P* is *intrinsically* good, then for any entity *Y* that can have *P*, *P* will be a good-making property for *Y*.

Let me point out two important features of this premise. First, it says that if something is a good-making property for *X*, then it is a good-making property for *Y* if *Y can have* that property. The following example illustrates the relevance of this restriction. It is good for a building to be hurricane-resistant. However, since God is an immaterial being, it would be ridiculous to think that God is hurricane-resistant. God does not even have all good-making properties that *humans* have. Being a fast swimmer

³⁴See Pamela C. Regan et al., "Partner Preferences: What Characteristics Do Men and Women Desire in Their Short-Term Sexual and Long-Term Romantic Partners?," *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality* 12 (2000), 8.

is a good-making property, but, of course, God is not a fast swimmer — nor is he a slow or an average one; he is simply not a swimmer at all, given that he does not have a body. That some property *P* (say, being hurricane-resistant or being a good swimmer) is a good property for one thing *X* (say, a building or a human being) does not mean that it is also a good-making property for some other thing *Y* (say, God). Only if *Y* can have that property is it good-making for *Y*.

A second important feature of (2) is that it is restricted to properties that are *intrinsically* good. It is a matter of philosophical debate precisely how we are to spell out what it is for goodness to be intrinsic rather than instrumental, but it seems the following will do for our purposes: something is intrinsically good if it is good in itself or for its own sake rather than as a means to something else. It is good that the water in my cup is fluid, but merely because I want to drink it. It is, therefore, merely instrumentally good. However, the beauty of Rembrandt's *The Jewish Bride* or the courage of a fireman who attempts to save someone's life by risking his own life are intrinsically good, because they are good in themselves and for their own sake.

The third premise is:

- (3) Having a sense of humor is a property that is intrinsically good.

To have a sense of humor seems to be a property that is *intrinsically* rather than (merely) *instrumentally* good. To have a sense of humor is good in itself or for its own sake, not merely because it is a means to something else. Among the things that are usually considered to be intrinsically good are happiness, beatitude, contentment, and pleasures and satisfactions of certain kinds.³⁵ To be amused seems to be one of the pleasures and satisfactions that are intrinsically good, for it seems that if someone is amused at something and there is nothing morally wrong about that, then that is a good thing in itself: it need not serve any further purpose in order to be good.

From (1) through (3) it follows that:

- (4) If God can have a sense of humor, then having a sense of humor is a good-making property for God.

The next premise is:

- (5) God can have a sense of humor.

I return to this premise below. (4) and (5) together allow us to infer that:

- (6) Having a sense of humor is a good-making property for God.

The next premise says that:

³⁵See, for instance, William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 87–88.

- (7) If having a sense of humor is a good-making property for God, he has that property.

And from (6) and (7) we conclude that:

- (8) God has the property of having a sense of humor.

Let me now defend the two premises not yet discussed. The reason to embrace (7) is that God is perfect in all regards. This is not to say that God will have *any* good-making property that he could have. It is, presumably, a good-making property of God that he has actualized the actual world. Assuming that God was free in actualizing this possible world, he could have actualized another possible world, and if he had done so, he would have exemplified the good-making property of having actualized *that* possible world. But God cannot actualize this possible world *and* another possible world. Hence, God will not have all good-making properties that he could have. With the property of having a sense of humor, things are different, though. There seems no property or set of properties that God contingently exemplifies, such as having actualized this possible world or having raised Jesus Christ from the dead, that rules out his having a sense of humor.

This leaves us with (5), which says that God can have a sense of humor. Is this true? Well, I argued that there is no reason to think that it conflicts with God's omniscience. And I cannot think of a good reason to think that it would be ruled about by God's omnipotence, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, or any other properties that are traditionally ascribed to God as essential properties that he has. There seems to be nothing in the nature of being amused or having the disposition to be amused that is ruled out by God's nature. Thus, for all we know, God can have a sense of humor. But then again, maybe not. One might think, for instance, that feeling amused is tied to having a body in the way that, say, feeling warm or feeling dizzy are. I do not know of any argument that has been given in favor of this view. The point, however, is that it is not *clear* that God can have a sense of humor. Thus, even though this second argument provides us with some reason to think that God has a sense of humor, there is room for doubt. Let us, therefore, turn to a third and final argument.

Third Argument. The final argument seems to me the strongest of the three philosophical arguments that I present in this section. The core idea is that humans have a sense of humor, that they have been created in the image of God, and that if some property humans have is neither morally bad nor the result of their finite nature, then that property belongs to the image of God. Here is the argument in some more detail:

- (9) If adult, properly functioning human beings have property *P* and their having *P* does not issue from their finiteness or morally imperfect nature, then their having *P* is part of what it is to be created in the image of God. [prem.]

- (10) If adult, properly functioning human beings' having *P* is part of what it is to be created in the image of God, then God has *P*. [prem.]
- (11) If adult, properly functioning human beings have property *P* and their having *P* does not issue from their finiteness or morally imperfect nature, then God has *P*. [from (9) and (10)]
- (12) Adult, properly functioning human beings have a sense of humor. [prem.]
- (13) To have a sense of humor does not issue from one's being finite or morally imperfect. [prem.]
- (14) God has a sense of humor. [from (11)–(13)]

This argument assumes not only the classical, Anselmian conception of God, but also the idea that humans have been created in the image of God. It seems, though, that this is a widely accepted theological idea that is pivotal to the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, so that I need not defend it here.

Premise (12) is an empirical platitude—which, unfortunately, is *not* to say that *all* humans have a sense of humor. (11) follows from (9) and (10), and (14) follows from (11)–(13). This leaves us with premises (9), (10), and (13). Let us consider them in this order.

As to (9), to be created in the image of God is to be created in such a way that one is *like* God. Of course, there are enormous differences between God and us. But—and this is crucial—they all seem to have to do with either our being finite, mortal beings, or with our imperfect nature, that is, with our tendency to perform wrong actions—our moral depravity, if you like. We are not omniscient, omnipotent, eternal (or everlasting), necessarily existent, or omnipresent, because we are finite, material beings. And God never has a wrong intention, never performs a wrong action, and never experiences a wrong emotion, because he is perfectly good. Any other property that does not come with our finite or imperfect nature seems to be a property that we share with God. We are persons and so is God. We are rational and so is God. We have free will and so does God. But if this is the case, then we have good reason to think that if human beings have some property *P* and their having *P* does not issue from their finiteness or moral imperfection, then their having *P* is part of what it is to be created in the image of God.

Premise (10) is supposed by all accounts of the *imago Dei* that I know of. Thus, if having free will is part of what it is to be created in the image of God, then God has free will. If being a rational being is part of what it is to be created in the image of God, then God is a rational being. And if being a person is part of what it is to be created in the image of God, then God is a person.

Finally, let us consider (13). In order to see whether or not having a sense of humor issues from one's being finite or one's being morally imperfect, let

us return to the four theories of humor described in Section 2. Again, I am *not* saying that these theories are correct. To give a defense of a particular theory of humor—one of these four theories or a rival theory—would be beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I will assume for the sake of argument that one or several of these theories are correct.

Now, it seems that having a sense of humor is *not* necessarily confined to the realm of the finite: an infinite being, if there is such a being, can feel superior, perceive incongruity, and, for all we know, play. He might not be able to experience a relief of tension, but, as we saw, such relief has to do with *laughter* (an expression of one's sense of humor) rather than with having a sense of humor itself. Nor does any of the four theories of having a sense of humor imply that it is morally wrong to have a sense of humor. It is as such not wrong to experience a relief of tension, to be amused at an incongruity, or to play. The only theory that might seem to cause trouble is the superiority theory. For would it not be wrong for God to feel superior toward other beings? Surely, it is at least sometimes morally wrong for humans to feel superior toward other human beings.

My reply is twofold. First, one's feeling superior to someone else is often wrong because we are *not* superior to other people or only superior in *some* regards, such as wealth and power, but *not* in other regards, such as patience and kindness. And, most importantly, it seems we are not superior in having more worth than other human beings. But God, being a perfect being, *is* in all regards superior to us and, being omniscient, he *knows* that he is. But then there seems nothing morally wrong about feeling superior. Second, it is widely agreed that some instances of feeling superior are wrong, whereas others are rather benign or even (morally) edifying.³⁶ There is nothing wrong with looking back with feelings of mild superiority toward an earlier, rather clumsy time slice of oneself, and the same applies to looking with feelings of mild superiority toward the actions or omissions of our fellow human beings. But if this is true for humans, why would it be different for God? God, being perfectly good, would have only the benign or even morally edifying sense of humor.

I conclude that this third argument provides us with good reason to think that God has a sense of humor.

6. Three Implications

So far, I have argued that three reasons to think that God has *no* sense of humor are unconvincing, that four biblical reasons for thinking that God *has* a sense of humor are also unconvincing, and that there are at least three philosophical reasons of varying strengths to think that God has a sense of humor. Overall, then, we have good reason to think that God has a sense of humor. Of course, it may be possible to come up with objections that I have not considered here, but rather than trying to be exhaustive, let

³⁶See, for instance, De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, 227.

us ask what the consequences are if what I have argued is correct. Here, I will spell out three of them.

1. If what I have argued is correct, then many theists will have to extend or on some points revise their image of God. First, the idea that God has a sense of humor changes what one could call the *face* of God or God's *character*. To say that someone knows a lot and that he is able to do a lot is to say something about that person, but it does not yet tell us much about her character. She could still have all sorts of character traits. Even an omniscient and omnipotent being could have all sorts of character traits—or, at least, that seems epistemically possible. In any case, when we say that someone has a great sense of humor, then that *does* tell us something important about that person's character, in the same way as someone's being mild and loving, or, in God's case, being omnibenevolent, tells us something about that person's character. Second, this also affects believers' *relationship* with God. If God is not only omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and so forth, but also someone with a sense of humor, then there is an additional reason to love God, worship him, and develop a friendship with him, in the same way as having a sense of humor is an important and sometimes even crucial building block in human friendships and other human relationships. In fact, as I suggested, it might even be that having a sense of humor is one aspect of the *imago Dei* and that our humorous side (or at least that part of it which is not morally wrong) reflects who God is.³⁷

2. In systematic theology, philosophical theology, and the philosophy of religion, the idea that God has a sense of humor has been straight-out rejected or, more often, simply ignored. But if there are good reasons to think that God has a sense of humor, then this might throw new light on certain important theological and philosophical questions about (belief in) God. For instance, in explaining certain features of the universe, we can now appeal not only to God's desire to bring about moral goodness or God's intention to make something aesthetically beautiful, but also to God's simply being amused. This might explain certain features of ourselves, of the animal kingdom, and of the universe, such as its sheer vastness in comparison with those parts that are life-permitting.

3. Finally, if God has a sense of humor, then this might also have consequences for religious practices, such as liturgy and prayer.

First, if I am right, then God is to be worshiped not only as loving, majestic, and so forth, but also as someone who has a sense of humor. God has a sense of humor and, being perfectly good, he will have a *good*, and even *perfect*, sense of humor. That is one of the many reasons to praise him.³⁸

Second, if God has a sense of humor, then humor and laughter may play a role in liturgical gatherings. In fact, within monotheism, there are

³⁷Thus also Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," 72.

³⁸That the idea that God has a sense of humor (or is "playful," as he calls it), has implications for religious worship, is also pointed out by Strange, "God and Laughter," 11.

already some religious traditions in which this is done. Ever since the fifteenth century, some churches have set aside the day after Easter as a day of humor and laughter. On this day, often referred to as *risus paschalis*, joking and jesting are thought to be perfectly appropriate in church. The reason is that God pulled a big joke on Satan by resurrecting Christ from the dead.³⁹ I do *not* say that this liturgical practice is justified. All I am saying is that it may very well be justified if, as I argued, we have good reason to think that God has a sense of humor.

Third, there are believers who make jokes in their prayers, while others find this inappropriate. Now, it does not follow from the fact that God has a sense of humor that making jokes in one's prayers is appropriate. There may be good reason to think that God's sense of humor is different from ours, or maybe we have insufficient reason to think that God's sense of humor is sufficiently similar to ours. Even if God's and our senses of humor are sufficiently similar, it is perhaps inappropriate to make jokes in liturgy or prayer because of God's majesty or our moral imperfection, maybe somewhat as it would be inappropriate for a normal citizen to make jokes when he meets the British queen for the first time. Whether it is appropriate to make jokes in the presence of God—in prayer or in liturgy—is still up for debate, but if what I have argued is right, then it is *not* a good argument against doing so to claim that God has no sense of humor or that we have insufficient reason to think that he has a sense of humor. Thus, my case makes the issue of whether it is appropriate to make jokes in the presence of God more pressing, for an important reason for thinking otherwise has now been removed.

7. Conclusion

Since the literature on whether or not God has a sense of humor is virtually non-existent, I have had to be sketchy at certain points in order to argue that God does indeed have a sense of humor, especially in Section 2, in which I presented the four main theories of having a sense of humor that we find in the literature.

I have considered three reasons for thinking that God *lacks* a sense of humor and found each of them wanting. I considered four biblical reasons for thinking that God *does* have a sense of humor, and it turned out that none of them are convincing. I also presented three philosophical arguments of varying strengths for the conclusion that God has a sense of humor. Especially the third argument provides a good reason to think that God has a sense of humor: if humans have been created in the image of God, then there is reason to think that God has a sense of humor, for having a sense of humor does not seem confined to the realm of the finite nor does it seem morally wrong to have a sense of humor. Finally, if I am right that we have good reason to think that God has a sense of humor, that makes a difference to how we think of God's character and humans'

³⁹See Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," 78.

relationship with him, it may shed new light on theism's power to explain or make sense of certain features of the universe, and it might make a difference to religious practices, such as liturgy and prayer.

I admit it is somewhat paradoxical that a dry, philosophical paper should attempt to convince people that God has a sense of humor. Fortunately, the incongruity theory implies that this very endeavor may be funny. Thus, it is good to know that, even if not all readers are convinced by my arguments, as long as the conclusion is true, God may smile at my attempt to establish it.⁴⁰

VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

⁴⁰For their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, I would like to thank Jeroen de Ridder, Nikolaj Nottelmann, Emanuel Rutten, Gijsbert van den Brink, Hans van Eyghen, René van Woudenberg, two anonymous referees of this journal, and, especially, Tom Flint. Publication of this article was made possible through the support of a grant from Templeton World Charity Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton World Charity Foundation.