

‘TO SERVE GOD WITTILY’—HUMOUR IN DISCERNMENT

By MICHAEL V. TUETH

A FEW YEARS AGO I saw one of those greeting cards you might enjoy but usually don't buy because you're not quite sure to whom you would send it. On the front of the card was written: 'You are the answer to my prayers'. The inside of the card continued: 'You're not what I prayed for, but apparently you're the answer'. The card's message wryly recognized not just our inability to control our life but also the difficulty of understanding the ways of God. Both of these problems permeate the process of discernment, which attempts to respond not simply to a fundamentally uncontrollable environment but also to the ultimately unfathomable actions of God.

In searching for a description of the discernment process, one could do worse than listen to Sir Thomas More in Robert Bolt's play, *A man for all seasons*, who, in the midst of his own heroic discernment, speaks these words:

God made the angels to show Him splendour—as He made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But man He made to serve Him wittily, in the tangle of his mind . . . And no doubt it delights God to see splendour where He only looked for complexity. But it's God's part, not our own, to bring ourselves to that extremity.¹

Discernment is indeed a tangle of our wits, bringing one's mental agility into play when God brings one to such extremities that the standard guidelines of logical discourse prove insufficient to the decision-making task, requiring a deliberate and intensely personal recourse to the divine voice within us which we traditionally called 'conscience', but which James Joyce more accurately dubbed 'inwit'. Often, in fact, truth and wisdom dwell just on the other side of the accepted wisdom and can be explored only by a reversal of the common understanding of things. After all, the truth, as Oscar Wilde reminded us, 'is rarely pure and seldom simple'.

To capture this rarely pure and seldom simple truth, humour may be one of our best devices for the two main tasks of the discernment process. The first task, as Michael Buckley defines it, is to answer the question, 'How does God direct human life to himself?'² Any genuinely salvific choice or action on the creature's part must be only as response to the divine action, the saving grace of God in Christ (Rom 5,2). Humour can aid this process by providing a more adequate appreciation of the range and variety of the ways of God. Secondly, as Buckley has shown, Ignatian discernment in particular offers an 'operative synthesis of preternatural influences, reason, and affectivity' in the process of making major life-choices. Humour requires a similar interplay of intellect and emotions (and perhaps even of the preternatural comic muse) in its approach to life.

The comic ways of God

God's ways are not our ways, indeed. They especially do not resemble the ways any respectable divinity ought to behave. The accounts of God's actions take comic twists from the earliest books of scripture.

One story that rewards a quick review, since it describes repeated instances of poor discernment, is the tale of Jonah. The biblical narrative is developed by a series of almost slapstick reversals of fortune. Jonah, commanded by God to travel to Nineveh to preach repentance, goes in exactly the opposite direction in a ship across the Mediterranean. Then, when the ship encounters a violent storm at sea, the sailors and Jonah engage in a dispute of Laurel-and-Hardy dimensions in its confusion, panic and eventual near-drowning of the hapless prophet. A great fish then swallows Jonah, who inexplicably utters a traditional thanksgiving-for-rescue prayer from inside the belly of destruction before he is vomited on to the shore. The next time Yahweh commands Jonah to preach repentance to the Ninevites, Jonah wisely decides to comply and, surprisingly, succeeds in getting the Ninevites to change their evil ways. Jonah, however, is disgruntled that the Lord should have mercy on a city which he was hoping to see destroyed. In a final joke, Yahweh provides a tree to offer Jonah shelter as he sits waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh, but then God makes the plant wither. In response to Jonah's rage over that practical joke, God says to him: 'You are only upset about a castor-oil plant which cost you no labour, which you did not make grow, which sprouted in a night and has perished in a night. And am I not to feel sorry for Nineveh, the great

city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?' (Jon 4, 10-11)

In this multi-faceted and many-layered comedy, the people of God are taught some of the most fundamental truths of God's relationship to the world he created, and the Gentile people in particular, all depicted through a series of comic mishaps and practical jokes. In a similar vein, the story of Susanna and the elders gains much of its charm from the many-levelled reversal of values and presuppositions, as has been delightfully explained by Steven Walker in his work, *Seven ways of looking at Susanna*.³

Yahweh's sense of humour is pithily summarized by Richard G. Cote:

He takes special delight in coming into people's lives in the oddest ways, at the oddest times, making the oddest demands. We often hear that God does not expect the impossible, yet the God of divine revelation is forever asking the impossible. He never appears bound by rules, fixed agenda, and planned encounters. He chooses the weak things of this world to confound the strong, the so-called foolish to outwit the wise; the lowly he seats ahead of the mighty. He sees in what seems rational, the irrational; in what seems important, the unimportant.⁴

But it is even more to the point to consider the example of Christ in the gospels, who, in his role as itinerant rabbi, led his listeners to insight and decision through use of wit and humour. Indeed the power of some of Christ's sayings can be lost if the comic exaggeration is not appreciated. For instance, Elton Trueblood invites us to examine more closely the comic situation of someone straining his food to avoid eating a gnat, but not observing that he is swallowing a camel; or taking meticulous care to clean the outside of a cup while leaving the inside filthy and hence much more offensive and dangerous. If we simply let our imaginations picture the scene of someone trying to remove a speck from someone else's eye, but having some difficulty doing so because there is a two-by-four plank lodged in his own eye, we begin to see the comic style in this and many other of Christ's epigrams and stories that, unfortunately, have lost their power to shock most of us through frequent and often dull presentations.⁵

Throughout all three chapters of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses humour to shock listeners into a reversal of some commonly-held

religious wisdom. He asks his listeners to picture someone lighting a candle and then putting it under a tub (5,14), trying by your own mental power to change the colour of your hair (5,36), or lengthening your life span by worrying about it (6,26), or letting everyone know you are fasting by putting on a gloomy appearance (6,16), or handing your son a snake when he asks for a fish (7,8), or building a house on sand (7,26). These chapters alone offer numerous instances of paradoxical and near-oxymoronic teachings.

Along with his teachings, Jesus's own behaviour offered constant challenges to the accepted ways. The stories of his eating and drinking with sinners, dealing with Samaritans and Gentiles, and, perhaps most dramatically, washing the feet of his disciples are told in such a way as not only to shock but often to provoke laughter. Try, in any dramatic reading, to keep an audience from laughing when Peter begs Jesus to wash 'not only my feet, but my hands and head as well' (Jn 13,9).

Beyond Jesus's own use of comic device in his teaching and actions, there is much to be learned by observing the narrative devices throughout the gospels. Three standard comic patterns, used by comic writers from Aristophanes to Woody Allen, are worth our attention.

The first pattern is the criticism of overly serious thinkers, especially those in positions of authority. In *The birds*, Aristophanes ridiculed Socrates and his students for their intellectual chicanery. Shakespeare wreaked comic vengeance on Malvolio, the Puritan manager of Olivia's household in *Twelfth night* and Jaques, the melancholy philosopher in *As you like it*. Larry Gelbart gives us Major Burns and Margaret Houlihan, the by-the-rule army officers of *M*A*S*H*. The evangelists join this tradition by depicting the scribes and Pharisees as overly serious literalists and dullards, with eyes to see and yet not seeing the truth, their authority threatened by someone who heals on the Sabbath, touches the lepers, and otherwise defies the religious *status quo*. The scholars tell us that much of this portrayal does not reflect the typical attitude of the Pharisees of Jesus's time, many of whom were far more willing to deal with exceptions to the Law than they are portrayed in the gospels. Is it too much of a leap to look at the scribes and Pharisees as literary creations of the evangelists to add drama (and comedy) to the conflict-stories of the gospels? In the universe of comedy, such people will always be the antagonists and must eventually be defeated, converted or banished from the new society which comic action creates. As Northrop Frye

remarks, 'The action of comedy, like the action of the Christian Bible, moves from law to liberty'.⁶

A second comic pattern frequently used in the gospel narratives is the depiction of a dangerous situation from which, because the framework is comic, the protagonist will emerge triumphant. Since the evangelists wrote from a post-resurrection perspective in which ultimate victory even over death has been assured by faith, many of the gospels take this comic turn. Recall, for instance, the panic of the apostles (not unlike Jonah) staring into the face of death during the storm on the lake, or the terror of Peter when he is identified and intimidated by a mere servant girl in Pilate's courtyard, or the same Peter's fear as he finds himself sinking into the water trying to walk towards his Master. These are the same flirtations with disaster that have shown up in countless comedies from Plautus to *Roger Rabbit*. These, however, are supposed to be revealing the ways of God to us.

Finally, an essentially comic element of surprise lies at the heart of many gospel episodes. The God who continually surprised the people by, first of all, choosing such a little nation as his own, then rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, choosing the most unlikely among them to be judges, kings, and prophets, and finally, sending them as their Messiah a carpenter born of a poor virgin from a backwater village, surely this God is something of a trickster who delights in defying human predictions.

The transcendent surprise in salvation-history, of course, occurred on Easter morning. In *The great code: the bible and literature*, Northrop Frye offers a particularly clear and concise explication of the resurrection-event as archetypically comic, sharing the mythic power of all tales of the victory of light over darkness, of spring over winter, of drowning and rising from the sea, of the triumph of youth and fertility over decay and sterility.⁷ But he neglects to mention that the death-resurrection story also plays a part in some of our great comic tales. Resurrection is at the heart of the Irish tale of *Finnegan's Wake*, the 'resurrection' of Molière's 'imaginary invalid' who, having pretended to be dead, suddenly arises and kisses his weeping daughter, or the primal joy of the child's jack-in-the-box that springs to life from an enclosed box to delight children of all times and ages.

Not content, however, with the basic comic joy of the resurrection from death, the gospel writers embellished the stories of Christ's post-resurrection appearances with such venerable comic devices as mistaken identity (Mary of Magdala mistakes Jesus for a gardener; the disciples on the road to Emmaus converse with Jesus for hours

before their eyes are opened); now-you-see-me-now-you-don't entrances and exits of the Risen Lord (in the Upper Room, in the inn at Emmaus, at the shore of Lake Tiberias), and even Socratic irony (as Jesus pretends to be 'the only one in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days').⁸

All of this scriptural evidence that, in discerning God's action, it can often prove helpful, sometimes even essential, to search for these comic patterns: 1) an ongoing engineering of the downfall of the overly serious and powerful; 2) a continual invitation to enter into danger from which only divine power can offer rescue; 3) a persistent encouragement to reverse the wisdom of the world with its unexamined assumptions and values; and 4) an incurable penchant for the element of surprise. The narrative structure of the Jonah tale, by the way, exemplifies each of these elements. If this is to treat God as a comedian, then so be it. The most appropriate response to such divine behaviour would be, I suggest, hearty and prolonged laughter—'my spirit finds joy in God my Saviour'.

The comic path to freedom

But beyond the laughter at God's comic ways, there are further uses of humour in the discernment process. In David Fleming's 'contemporary reading' of the Spiritual Exercises, we read: 'The structure of these exercises has the purpose of leading a person to true spiritual freedom. We attain this goal by gradually bringing an order of values into our lives so that we make no choice or decisions because we have been influenced by some disordered attachment or love.'⁹

This freedom from disordered attachment is also the goal of humour. Northrop Frye describes the action of a comedy as beginning with a display of a character's 'ritual bondage' to a predominant passion, and continuing with a repetition of that obsession.¹⁰ The miser dotes constantly on money; the lovelorn young lady is obsessed with the handsome hero; the hypochondriac lives in constant fear of fatal disease, and so on.

Closely aligned with this dynamic, in Frye's analysis, is the movement of comedy from illusion to truth. Frye writes:

Illusion is whatever is fixed or definable, and reality is best understood as its negation. Whatever reality is, it's not that. Hence the importance of the theme of creating and dispelling illusion in comedy: the illusions caused by disguise, obsession, hypocrisy, or unknown parentage.¹¹

Ignatian discernment aims for a similar examination and dispelling of the illusions created by inordinate emotional attachments, so

that, by freeing oneself from emotional bondage, one can arrive at true Christian freedom and joy. The Meditation on the Two Standards (Exx 136-148) and the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (Exx 313-336), for instance, present the evil spirit as a tyrant and an illusionist, from whose control and deception the exercitant prays to be freed.

In this context, laughter can function as exorcist, driving out the illusions of our inordinate attachments through laughter and ridicule. Louis Kronenberger offers a pertinent explanation of this function of comedy:

Tragedy is always lamenting the Achilles tendon, the destructive flaw in man; but comedy, in a sense, is always looking for it . . . Comedy, in brief, is criticism. Through laughing at others, we purge ourselves of certain spiteful and ungenerous instincts . . . The higher comedy mounts, the airier and more brilliant its forms, the more are we aware of man's capacity for being foolish or self-deluded or complacent.¹²

This comic purpose nicely dovetails with the aims of the discernment process. William Barry describes discernment as a 'schooling of the heart' in a 'world of conflicting desires, of conflicting groups, of conflicting claims'. According to Barry, discernment is the way to align oneself to the one action of God.

If I want to attune my actions and intentions with God's one action and intention, then I must discipline my heart to hear what his intention is, or rather, I must let my heart be disciplined to hear how my actions fit into his one action. . . In this process I must learn two equally difficult and seemingly incompatible attitudes: to trust myself and my reactions and to recognize how easily I can delude myself.¹³

Barry's formula for discernment closely resembles the function of comedy described by Kronenberger. Comedy certainly explores and tests a wide spectrum of human emotions. Beyond its natural components of joy and exhilaration, it often involves a number of other feelings as well; anger, disappointment, affection, reconciliation, sexual attraction, envy.

Examine, for instance, the story of the man who ordered a pair of pants from a tailor, who takes six weeks to complete the job. The infuriated customer berates the tailor: 'It took God only six days to create the world, and it takes you six weeks to make a pair of pants'.

'Yes,' replies the tailor. 'But look at these pants—and look at the world!' Or consider the bitter humour in the following version of a treaty made with the native Americans by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs: 'This land will belong to the people of the Indian nation as long as the river runs, the grass grows green, and the mountains stand—or sixty days, whichever comes first'. Or picture the young man who tells the young woman at the singles bar, 'If you can guess my exact weight, I'll spend the night with you'. The woman scornfully replies, 'Okay, eight thousand pounds'. 'Close enough', replies the lusty male. In these stories, under the aegis of humour, cynicism blends with faith, sexual drives compete with hostility, and righteous anger confronts hypocrisy.

It is possible, of course, to use humour to avoid direct emotional experience and forthright expression of one's feelings. The great clowns and comics of history, however, have never been escapists. They focus our attention on primal emotional states by embodying them in exaggerated forms. We can look for examples of this among the stock characters throughout comic literature, the *commedia* figures, the 'humours' portrayed in the creations of Ben Jonson, the stock figures of ridicule and the lovelorn heroes and heroines of Molière and Shakespeare. Or we need only look at the standard tyrannical bosses, bewildered parents, scheming opportunists, dim-witted accomplices, lusty adolescents, and wisecracking children who inhabit the situation comedies on television today. Humour expresses in exaggerated form an endless list of emotional responses. That kind of clowning can be put to good use in one's own discernment process.

In workshops I conduct on religion and humour, I lead the group through sessions in which each participant first identifies his or her best quality and then acts out that quality in exaggerated form. For example, he or she becomes very helpful or highly organized or particularly perceptive, intuitive, practical, or whatever else. I then place that person in a standard situation with another workshop participant acting out his or her own exaggerated virtue. The results are often quite hilarious, as the overly organized person collides with the overly helpful person in a network of cross-purposes. Similarly, someone in a discernment situation might find it quite enlightening to exaggerate his or her best qualities. The same technique can be applied to one's worst qualities. I often invite workshop participants to concentrate on their worst physical feature, exaggerate that feature to grotesque proportions, and then enjoy the comedy of such a

condition. Similar exercises can be conducted in discernment as one evaluates one's strengths and weaknesses, fantasizing about diverse choices in the light of one's major character traits. If the matter that is being considered for discernment causes fear, one could exaggerate that fear until one is turned into a shivering Sancho Panza or a Cowardly Lion. If some aspect of the matter provokes anger, one can 'out-Herod Herod' with shouting and screaming, or beat the stuffings out of a pillow or something even more substantial as John Belushi's Samurai characters did so well. If sadness is one's genuine response, even that can be exaggerated to comic levels. Shakespeare made comic mockery of melancholy lovers in *A midsummer night's dream* and *As you like it*. So we, ever so sensitively, can exaggerate our feelings of loneliness, self-pity, or grief until we reach levels of absurdity. Thus, quite rapidly, we can clarify our genuine feelings, feel their power, and sense the directions in which they are leading us.

Finally, one can exaggerate feelings towards another person. For example, a somewhat nervous moment in my workshop occurs when I ask the participants to focus attention on someone they genuinely dislike. I then encourage them to draw a cartoon of that person's face, exaggerating the facial features to emphasize all especially odious characteristics. That particular exercise is only the beginning of a process which usually ends in some sort of imaginative reconciliation with the enemy. But this first stage is usually quite cathartic and illuminating, as each person must specify the qualities that prompt such an angry reaction. Inevitably, however, this exercise evokes some wicked laughter, comic threats, and assorted vituperation on the part of most of the participants. It is easy to imagine similar exercises to express one's affection for someone else, or the more subtle attitudes of competitiveness, envy, anxiety, fear, and so on.

And so, with one's emotions revealed in the light of divine love, one can begin the process of liberation and enlightenment that is discernment. It need not be a tragic journey, as it was for Oedipus, Orestes or Lear. It can be the alternative route of comedy, imitating instead the wisdom of Lear's Fool, who in Act I already knows what it will take the entire play for the King to discover.

Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

Fool: All thy other titles thou has given away; that thou wast born with. (I. iv. 148-150)

Perhaps it is that very birthright, the foolishness we were born with, that will lead us finally to the mind and heart of God.

NOTES

¹ Bolt, Robert: *A man for all seasons* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p 73.

² Buckley, Michael J.: 'The structure of the rules for discernment of spirits', *The Way Supplement* 20 (Autumn, 1973), p 21.

³ Walker, Steven C.: *Seven ways of looking at Susanna* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1984). See especially Chapter 3: 'Susanna as Reversal Tale'.

⁴ Cote, Richard G.: *Holy mirth: a theology of laughter* (Whitinsville, MA: Affirmation Books, 1986), pp 49-50.

⁵ Trueblood, Elton: *The humor of Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1964). See especially Chapter V for fuller examination of these stories as comic tales.

⁶ Frye, Northrop: *The anatomy of criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1957), p 181.

⁷ See his full treatment of this pattern in pages 172-193 of *The great code: the bible and literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

⁸ The accounts of the post-resurrection appearances are found in Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24 and John 20-21.

⁹ Fleming, David L.: *A contemporary reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), p 7.

¹⁰ Frye, Northrop: *The anatomy of criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1957), p 167.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 168-9.

¹² Kronenburger, Louis.: *The thread of laughter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952), p 14.

¹³ Barry, William A.: 'Toward a theology of discernment', *The Way Supplement* 64 (Spring, 1989), p 136.