



Redeeming *Life of Brian*: How Monty Python (Ironically) Proclaims Christ *Sub Contrario*

HANS WIERSMA

In 1979, *Monty Python's Life of Brian* opened to somewhat mixed reviews.¹ Although most of the written reviews appearing in newspapers and magazines were largely favorable, such reviews did not usually give credence to the objections raised by the film's detractors. That is, while professional film critics lauded *Brian* as a typically adept Monty Python send-up, the response of lay critics, many of whom were religious leaders, was less sanguine.² Both Jewish rabbis and Christian pastors organized groups to picket theaters showing *Brian*. The film was banned in some British and American municipalities. Fanning the flames, BBC television broadcast a "debate" with Christian apologist Malcolm Muggeridge and Anglican bishop Mervyn Stockwood taking on two Pythons, John Cleese and Michael Palin.³ Seeking to soft-pedal the controversy—and therefore the film's controversial con-

¹All references to and citations of the film are based upon *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, The Immaculate Edition, DVD, directed by Terry Jones (1979; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007).

²In his diary, Michael Palin recalled picking up an issue of *Variety* "which has one entire page devoted to the condemnations of various religious groups. 'Catholic Org Rap Orion For Brian,' 'Rabbinical Alliance Pours On Condemnation of *Life of Brian*,' 'Lutheran Broadcast Slam at *Life of Brian*—Crude, Rude.'" Commented Palin: "It looks as though we may become a force for ecumenical harmony." Michael Palin, *Diaries 1969–1979: The Python Years* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2006) 574.

³*Friday Night, Saturday Morning*, Series 1, Edition 7, British Broadcasting Channel 2 (London: BBC2,

Monty Python's Life of Brian has delighted many and offended others. Some Christians dismiss it; others have tried to analyze it seriously, in admiration or critique. Viewed from the perspective of its sharp irony, Life of Brian may teach us something about Jesus and the cross sub contrario—that is, under its opposite.

tent—film critic Roger Ebert pooh-poohed “those representatives of established religions who have condemned the movie for being blasphemous.”⁴ Ebert’s review concluded that *Life of Brian* “is so cheerfully inoffensive that, well, it’s almost blasphemous to take it seriously.”⁵

This essay will nevertheless risk such blasphemy. In taking *Life of Brian* seriously, I seek neither to commend nor condemn the film from an entertainment point of view. Instead, I offer a serious-minded evaluation in three parts. I begin by exploring existing interpretations of *Life of Brian* as a sophisticated work of “higher” historical criticism that, in the end, depicts familiar versions of the “historical Jesus.” As shall be seen, such interpretations credit the Pythons for reading up on their subject matter, namely, first-century Palestine and the life (or lives) of Jesus. As validation of such *Brian* interpretations, I will next attend to a previously neglected layer of analysis. This analysis will explore how *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*—far from merely representing a “developed dottiness” (as suggested in Ebert’s review)—utilizes a persistent ironic stance that culminates in a profound challenge to the cross-centered testimonies of the canonical Gospels. Finally, and above all, I wish to demonstrate that *Life of Brian* can nevertheless be interpreted in favor of the “Christ of faith.” This interpretation becomes possible when an additional level of irony is applied, namely, the irony of a God hidden and revealed “under the opposite.”

ANALYZING HUMOR

A word about the academic analysis of humor is in order. Many have endeavored such analyses and most mention at the outset that deconstructing “funny” is likely to yield unfunny results.⁶ The underlying notion represents a kind of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle of comedy: when put under the microscope, a humorous object appears to behave in solely serious fashion. That is certainly another dimension of the risk of treating *Life of Brian* as serious scholarship of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Be that as it may, there is precedent for risking this kind of funny bone removal in the case of *Life of Brian*. In a 1998 article titled “*Life of Brian* Research,” the “minimalist” biblical scholar Philip R. Davies defended his own sober scholarly treatment of the Python troupe’s veiled life of Jesus in this way: “If Monty Python wishes to make fun of what is serious, why should one not make something serious out of what is fun?”⁷

November 9, 1979). The conversation was facilitated by guest host Tim Rice, the librettist of another controversial “take” on the Gospels, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Clips of the *Brian* debate can, at the moment of this writing, be viewed via YouTube and other websites.

⁴Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun Times*, January 1, 1979; at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19790101/REVIEWS/901010318/1023> (accessed February 18, 2012).

⁵Ibid.

⁶“Discussions of humor are often ponderous and grim,” says John Allen Paulos in his *Mathematics and Humor: A Study of the Logic of Humor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 1.

⁷Philip R. Davies, “*Life of Brian* Research,” *Biblical Studies / Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*,

The fact that the members of the Monty Python comedy troupe intended at least some serious provocation (or seriously provocative irony) with *Life of Brian* can be discerned from the film's original working title: *Jesus Christ: Lust for Glory*.⁸ However, it was rather quickly decided that a full, frontal attack on Jesus was not in the best interest of making an accessible comedy—at least not the kind of comedy that was going to be picked up by a major motion picture studio. As the film's director, Terry Jones, later explained, "We knew it was going to vaguely follow the life of Christ, but it quickly became obvious that it wasn't going to be the life of Christ because that wasn't where the humour lay."⁹ Another Python, Terry Gilliam, explained that the group "came around to the feeling that Jesus was OK we weren't going to take the piss out of him, he was genuinely OK, so that's where Brian got created, he was a parallel."¹⁰ Other troupe members have responded in similar fashion: *Life of Brian* bears no animus toward the man whom two billion or so Christians name as Lord and Savior.¹¹ Despite (or because of) such claims, at least two biblical scholars have written articles that take seriously the implications raised by the notion that the film's main character is in fact—as Gilliam indicated—an analogue of the Jesus encountered in the pages of the Gospels.

PHILIP DAVIES ON *BRIAN*

The essay titled "*Life of Brian* Research" by the aforementioned Philip Davies begins with these words: "I have long been of the conviction that Monty Python's *Life of Brian* is an indispensable foundation to any student's career in New Testament studies."¹² This is quite a claim, especially when one extends Davies's words to all students of the New Testament, including preachers and Bible Study leaders. Davies maintains that far from being a shallow send-up of religious life in the first century, *Brian* "reflects a higher level of historical and biblical research than nearly all exemplars of the Hollywood genre... [and] also engages with a number of basic scholarly, historical and theological issues."¹³ That a Bible scholar has such a high view of *Life of Brian* may come as a surprise. On the other hand, Davies has the reputation of being a contrarian. That is, Davies's own work deconstructing the history of ancient Israel suggests that he is likely to have an affinity for attempts to deconstruct the ancient world inhabited by Jesus of Nazareth—and Davies clearly sees *Life of Brian* as such an attempt.

ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 400. This article was later added as the final chapter to Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* 2nd ed. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 2004) 142–155. Henceforth, all citations of Davies's "*Life of Brian* Research" will be from the 2004 book.

⁸David Morgan, *Monty Python Speaks!* (New York: Avon, 1999) 224–226.

⁹*Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 278.

¹¹For instance, in the debate with Muggeridge noted above, Michael Palin explained that "the more that we read about Jesus and the background to his life, it was quite obvious that there was very little to ridicule in Jesus's life." *Friday Night, Saturday Morning*, November 9, 1979.

¹²Davies, *Whose Bible?* 142.

¹³*Ibid.*

Davies's article is, in fact, a deconstruction of Monty Python's deconstruction of the life and times of Jesus. In this regard, Davies's exegesis of *Life of Brian* has two aims: (1) to expose "the abundant evidence of historical and biblical research reflected in the script of this film" and (2) to "deal with the theological strategies of this theological film."¹⁴ The first aim comprises a somewhat moot point. That is, the fact that the Monty Python troupe members did their homework—that they spent time familiarizing themselves with modern New Testament scholarship—is a matter of abundant record.¹⁵ Davies's essay, on the other hand, ignores the record and instead relies entirely on the film's internal testimony regarding signs of Jesus research.

the fact that the Monty Python troupe members did their homework—that they spent time familiarizing themselves with modern New Testament scholarship—is a matter of abundant record

As evidence of historical and biblical research, Davies first suggests that *Life of Brian*'s competing political factions (the "Judean Peoples Front," the "Peoples Front of Judea," etc.) are based upon Flavius Josephus's depiction of the "Jewish Wars."¹⁶ Next, Davies discerns a connection between a rabbinic commentary and *Brian*'s stoning scene ("Nobody is to stone anyone until I blow this whistle") and another connection between the legend that Jesus was a son of a Roman soldier and that *Brian*'s Brian is the son of Roman soldier.¹⁷ Third, in an admitted long shot, Davies wonders if *Brian*'s famous mishearing of the Sermon on the Mount ("Blessed are the cheesemakers") is derived from the knowledge that the valley that once divided the city of Jerusalem was known as *Tyropoean*, which is "widely understood to derive from the Greek word 'cheesemaker'"!¹⁸ Finally, Davies points out that *Life of Brian* frequently alludes to the canonical Gospels—a point that is not so much evidence that Monty Python examined New Testament scholarship as it is evidence that Monty Python took the trouble to read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.¹⁹

The second aim of Davies's essay—to address *Life of Brian*'s theological strategies—is more compelling. In this section, Davies introduces the observation that

¹⁴Davies, *Whose Bible?* 142–143.

¹⁵Roger Wilmut, *From Fringe to Flying Circus: Celebrating a Unique Generation of Comedy, 1960–1980* (London: Methuen, 1980) 248; Morgan, *Python Speaks!* 227, in which Python's awareness of the historical background of the messianic expectation and of crucifixion is discussed; Graham Chapman et al., *The Pythons: Autobiography* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2003) 279, in which Eric Idle notes that, by way of preparation, he even read the Dead Sea Scrolls.

¹⁶Davies, *Whose Bible?* 143–145. There are many editions of Josephus available, including Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War: Revised Edition*, ed. E. Mary Smallwood, trans. Geoffrey A. Williamson (New York: Penguin, 1981).

¹⁷Davies, *Whose Bible?* 145–146.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 146–148.

most Hollywood treatments of the life of Jesus emphasize Christ's divinity over his humanity. He suggests that "an American mass cinema audience" would not tolerate a mostly human Jesus—as they did not tolerate Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*; "The treatment of Jesus in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*," however, "brilliantly succeeds in resolving the dilemma of Jesus's dual nature."²⁰ The film indeed depicts the divine Jesus of Nazareth: born in a stable awash with light, preaching with authority, and healing the sick. On the other hand, Brian of Nazareth is perfectly human. As a result, Davies perceives that the film has managed the neat trick of depicting at once the Jesus of faith *and* the Jesus of history:

What Monty Python has done is to split the cultural icon of Jesus into two parts. One bears the name of Jesus, and the other the name of Brian. The former represents the icon of most filmed Jesuses, who must be recognizably divine, while the latter constitutes the icon of most scholarly written Jesuses, who must be human and have a personality.... The Nestorian controversy instigated a debate about whether the second person of the trinity has one or two natures.... Rudolph Bultmann famously severed the "Jesus of history" from the "Christ of faith." In the shadow of two famous dichotomies, then, Monty Python divides the two natures into two persons, and assigns divinity to the one... and humanity to the other ("who shall be called Brian").²¹

To flesh out Davies's point, a cinematically dichotomized Jesus presents an implied challenge—one that asks, "Will the real Jesus please stand up?" While the divine Jesus briefly pictured in the film certainly appears to be the kind of fellow who would beckon disciples to "follow me," the historically conditioned Jesus (a.k.a. Brian) declares, "You don't need to follow me; you don't need to follow anybody!" While the divine Jesus can heal a leper (thereby rendering him an ungrateful ex-leper robbed of his livelihood), the human Jesus (Brian) can protest when his followers falsely proclaim him a miracle worker (Blind Man: "The Master has healed me"; Brian: "I didn't touch him!"). Finally, while biblically literate viewers may remember that the canonical Jesus gave assent when Peter identified him as the Messiah, the Pythonical Jesus can proclaim: "I'm not the Messiah! Will you please listen? I am not the Messiah, do you understand?! Honestly!" Indeed, in so many words, the film has Jesus (er, Brian) insisting that he is *only* human.

Davies rounds out his essay with observations regarding sin and salvation. Davies sees that "sheer incompetence" is the "original sin" from which *Life of Brian*'s humanity needs to be redeemed—an original sin "which increases as one moves up the scale of authority."²² Indeed, it is one mishap, mistake, and misunderstanding after another that leads to Brian's crucifixion. Or is it Jesus' crucifixion? Here, Davies fails to point out something obvious, namely, that after Christ's brief cameos toward the beginning of the film, the canonical Jesus disappears from the film altogether. This fact leaves room for two conclusions: the divine Jesus has

²⁰Ibid., 148–149.

²¹Ibid., 150–151.

²²Ibid., 152.

left the building or he has merged into the human Jesus (Brian). Earlier in the essay, Davies claims that the viewer “necessarily recombines the figures.”²³ But what if the filmmakers also “necessarily” recombined their divided Christ? The question is worth asking, especially since, as Davies points out, “Monty Python’s humanity is irredeemable and furthermore has no wish to be redeemed.” Moreover, “Messiahs are not created or begotten; they have messiahship thrust upon them by a superstitious and feckless humanity.”²⁴ Davies’s observations prompts one more: given a humanity that doesn’t want or need redeeming, it is certainly no accident, then, that Brian’s crucifixion accomplishes nothing.

The cross depicted in the film is devoid of physical pain, blood, obedience, sacrifice, death, and cosmic consequence. What the film’s cross does offer, however, is a buoyant tune—the film’s penultimate irony.

Ironically, however, Davies sees that the film’s “main flaw...is revealed in the final scene. Hanging on a cross, singing ‘Always look on the bright side of life’ is funny so long as the viewer forgets what crucifixion was actually like.” Well, yes. That is why the final scene is funny—even if uncomfortably funny. The cross (*crosses*, actually) depicted in the film is devoid of physical pain, blood, obedience, sacrifice, death, and cosmic consequence. What the film’s cross does offer, however, is the buoyant tune Davies mentions. But Davies appears to miss the ultimate import of that tune and, therefore, the film’s penultimate irony. In the end, Davies’s appreciation of the film is self-referential:

To a cultural critic (especially a deconstructively-minded one interested in overturning hierarchies of discourse), the ideology of the *Life of Brian* is as interesting and potentially valuable as those that the various Lives of Jesus try to impose on the Christian messiah.²⁵

As such, Davies’s initial (and only) contribution to *Life of Brian* research is a worthy one. However, it leaves undone the work of (a) identifying which historical Jesuses are represented by Brian and (b) analyzing the film’s “hierarchies of discourse” in all of their ironic possibilities.

JAMES CROSSLEY ON BRIAN

In an article published in 2011, scholar James G. Crossley picks up where Philip Davies left off, asking “Life of Brian or Life of Jesus?”²⁶ Crossley begins by re-

²³Ibid., 151.

²⁴Ibid., 153.

²⁵Ibid., 155.

²⁶James G. Crossley, “Life of Brian or Life of Jesus? Uses of Critical Biblical Scholarship and Non-orthodox Views of Jesus in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*,” *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 1/1 (2011) 93–114. Available at <http://www.relegere.org/index.php/relegere/article/viewFile/10/365> (accessed on February 18, 2012).

stating the assertion that lies at the heart of Davies's article, namely, that—in Crossley's words—"the film stealthily constructs a very different Jesus of history from the Christ of faith."²⁷ Crossley not only endorses Davies on this point, he also endorses as legitimate the complaints of those who see the film as offensive, "at least in the sense of offensive to those Christians who may personally find reconstructions of the historical Jesus blasphemous." On this count, Crossley declares, "Muggeridge and Stockwood still have a point: there *is* significant overlap between" Jesus and Brian.²⁸ Finally, Crossley gets to the main purpose of his essay, namely, to spell out in detail the ways in which *Life of Brian* applies "controversial views about Jesus (and the historical Jesus in particular) which have been put forward both in modern critical scholarship, as well as by ancient critics of what we would now call orthodox Christianity."²⁹

*Crossley's contribution is to make explicit the
various portraits of the historical Jesus that emerge
from the film*

Crossley's contribution is to make explicit the various portraits of the historical Jesus that emerge from the film, such as "The Revolutionary Jesus" (as set forth by S. G. F. Brandon and others), "The Not-Born-of-a-Virgin and Not-Risen-from-Death Jesus" (as set forth by ancient sources and modern critiques of the Gospels' infancy narratives and resurrection accounts), "The I'm-Not-the-Messiah Jesus" (as set forth by William Wrede and others), "The Jewish Rabbi Jesus" (as set forth by Geza Vermes and others), and "The I-Love-Mary-Magdalene Jesus" (as set forth by Nikos Kazantzakis and, in a different way, by Dan Brown).³⁰ According to Crossley, each of these versions of the historical Jesus enjoys strong representation in *Life of Brian*. Crossley concludes that "there is no end to the Christians who are at least uncomfortable with critical readings of biblical texts....From such a perspective *Life of Brian* is not so sweet and innocent. It subtly but clearly takes up some of the more challenging reconstructions of the historical Jesus from popular and scholarly thought and applies them to Brian."³¹

Crossley's analysis of *Life of Brian*'s historical Jesus themes is helpful especially for those interested in exploring the insights, complexities, and problems of modern Jesus research. On the other hand, Crossley's essay leaves *Brian*'s philosophical/theological themes more or less untouched. And although Davies's article *did* touch on such themes, it did not go far enough. In fact, as far as the crux of the matter is concerned, Davies appears to have missed the deep ironies of the infa-

²⁷Ibid., 95.

²⁸Ibid., 95–96. Italics in original.

²⁹Ibid., 97.

³⁰Ibid., 98–113. See Crossley's ample footnotes for the works written by the various proponents (and opponents) of the several historical Jesuses represented here.

³¹Ibid., 113–114.

mous crucifixion scene—or at least backed off. Therefore, the work that both essays have left to the essay at hand concerns the manner in which *Life of Brian* employs irony to preach its message and make its truth claim.

THE USE OF IRONY

Irony, as I use it here, refers to that phenomenon by which language, images, and events conceal meaning from some while at the same time revealing meaning to others. Irony typically refers to the gap or incongruence between (1) what is meant and what is understood (verbal irony), (2) what is known by the outsider and what is known by the insider (dramatic irony), and (3) what happens and what is expected (situational irony). Put simply, irony is the breach between *what is* and *what is thought to be*.

One of *Life of Brian*'s many memorable characters is Ben the dungeondweller, played by Michael Palin. Despite the fact that Ben has been chained up for five years (and only recently hung right side up), he is nothing short of supportive of the Roman occupation of Judea. When Brian is thrown into Ben's cell, Ben informs Brian that crucifixion is the usual punishment for a "first offence." Ben further explains that crucifixion is "the best thing the Romans ever did for us...If we didn't have crucifixion, this country would be in a right bloody mess." Palin explains that the Ben character gets laughs because he "behaves completely the opposite to how you would expect him to behave; I suppose that's where the comedy is."³² Palin's assessment can just as well be applied to most of the characters encountered in *Life of Brian*—except, ironically, Brian himself. That is, much of the humor of the film lies in the fact that, while Brian plays it straight, just about everyone he meets behaves in ways "completely the opposite of how you would expect them to behave." Such opposite behavior—let's call it behavior *sub contrario*—is the film's main modus. At its basic level, *Life of Brian* employs a textbook ironic sensibility: the breach between what is expected of a familiar biblical situation and what actually transpires.

The film's opening scene introduces this breach—a breach that is maintained all the way through to the cruciform (or cruci-deform) conclusion. Those who have seen *Brian* a number of times have likely forgotten how they responded the first time they viewed the film's first ten minutes. When the three wise men approach a mother with a newborn in a manger, the first-time viewer can hardly be faulted for feeling a bit uneasy. After all, the mother of the newborn does not act very humble or meek or pious or submissive—not to mention virginal. Brian's nativity is surely incongruent with the one celebrated on Christmas Eve. When the scene concludes with the wise men discovering the *actual* nativity just down the street, part of the laugh comes from relief that our preconceived nativity remains intact. The other part of the laugh comes from realizing we've been had. The scene

³²Morgan, *Python Speaks!* 235.

demonstrates that from the beginning *Life of Brian* is (a) aware of the viewer's knowledge of the biblical narrative, (b) willing to offer an opposite (or counter-) narrative, and (c) confident that it will reap the comic benefits caused by the breach between (a) and (b).

As *Life of Brian* continues, Jesus and Brian grow up. The next time we encounter the two figures, it is A.D. 33, Saturday afternoon, about teatime. The scene is the Sermon on the Mount, with Jesus atop the mount, and Brian clear on the other side of the crowd (across the breach). It is the last time we see Jesus. Brian, on the other hand, gets mixed up with a group of Judean rebels and their plot to kidnap Pilate's wife. Brian is arrested and so begins the series of events that eventually land Brian on Calvary. As the film heads toward its climactic scene, the alert viewer begins to detect the odd reference to crucifixion. The first reference is uttered by Ben, the Roman-loving character mentioned above. Soon after comes this exchange between a Roman Centurion and Matthias, Son of Deuteronomy of Gath (who earlier in the film managed to escape being stoned to death for uttering the name of Jehovah):

Centurion: You know the penalty laid down by Roman law for harboring a known criminal?

Matthias: No.

Centurion: Crucifixion.

Matthias: Oh.

Centurion: Nasty, eh?

Matthias: Could be worse.

Centurion: What do you mean, "could be worse"?

Matthias: Well, you could be stabbed.

Centurion: Stabbed? Takes a second. Crucifixion lasts hours! It's a slow, horrible death!

Matthias: Well, at least it gets you out in the open air.

Centurion: You're weird.

Whether intentional or not, this scene, which comes a few minutes beyond the mid-point of the movie, has the effect of giving the viewer notice of what is to come. Like the halfway mark of Mark's Gospel, in which Christ turns his attention to what awaits him in Jerusalem (Mark 8:31), Matthias's assessment of crucifixion indicates the trajectory of Brian's fate from this point forward. The scene seems to indicate that where the subject of the cross is concerned, things are going to get, well, weird. As if to demonstrate this point, there is this brief follow up:

Centurion: Have you ever seen anyone crucified?

Matthias: Crucifixion's a doddle.

Centurion: Stop saying that.

Matthias's curt claim, together with the centurion's unease, introduces *Life of Brian*'s leitmotiv regarding the cross, the film's essential breach. On the one hand,

you have the audience's understanding that the cross is a serious matter, an instrument of cruel justice, punishment, and death, and the central symbol of the central event of the Christian narrative. On the other hand, you have *Brian's* counter-narrative: the cross is a doddle: a piece of cake, a picnic, a walk in the park, a breeze. That's irony.

As opposed to the Gospels' witness that the cross is part of the divine plan, Brian's cross results from a series of misunderstandings, misdirects, and mistaken identities. Brian manages to escape his initial detainment, but in the process of fleeing the Roman guard, he is mistaken for the Messiah. This unwanted attention gets Brian arrested once more. He is brought before Pontius Pilate, who pronounces the sentence: "Cwucify him well." Consequently, Brian is placed with a crowd of 139 others slated for crucifixion ("Special Celebration: Passover"). In charge of organizing the mass execution is Nisus Wettus, a caring, sensitive man who keeps the line moving by politely asking each prisoner, "Crucifixion? Good. Out the door, line on the left, one cross each." Here is where we meet Mr. Cheeky:

- Nisus: Crucifixion?
 Cheeky: Uh, freedom for me. They said I hadn't done anything, so I could go free and live on an island somewhere.
 Nisus: Oh? Oh, that's jolly good. Well, off you go then!
 Cheeky: Nah, I'm only pulling your leg. It's crucifixion really.
 Nisus: Oh, I see. Very good, very good. Well, out the door...
 Cheeky: [cheerfully] Yeah. I know the way. Out the door, one cross each, line on the left.

The above scene establishes what *Life of Brian* veterans already know: Monty Python will play the crucifixion-as-doddle idea through to the end. When Brian holds up the line, Mr. Cheeky exclaims: "Get a move on, big nose! There's people waiting to be crucified out here!" Then, as the "crucifixion party" is marched through the streets, there's old Ben yelling out from his cell, "You lucky bastards! You lucky, jammy bastards!" The article by Crossley (considered above) suggests that the devout may find *Life of Brian* offensive because of its depictions of an alternative Jesus. However, my own sense—wholly informed by the responses of my students—is that what Christian viewers find most jarring is *Brian's* alternative cross. On the other hand, the film's relentless presentation of crucifixion as, at worst, an inconvenience has a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* effect. Still, one is compelled to ask, *ad absurdum* to what end?

When Brian and the other 139 prisoners are lifted up on their crosses, it is Brian who appears to be most distressed. While those being crucified around Brian continue their petty squabbling ("We don't want any more Samaritans around here"), Brian despairs when both his mother and his girlfriend abandon him. His People's Front of Judea comrades also abandon him, but not before saluting Brian with a proper round of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Finally, Brian's chance at a last-minute reprieve is confounded when Mr. Cheeky is freed in Brian's stead.

Here, at his end, Brian hangs forsaken, crushed, his cross certainly no doddle. Which is when an optimistic voice pipes up: “Cheer up, Brian....When you’re chewing on life’s gristle, don’t grumble; give a whistle. And this’ll help things turn out for the best.”

*the song “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” is,
somewhat obviously, the film’s grand finale of irony*

The song “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” is, somewhat obviously, the film’s grand finale of irony.³³ The sight and sound of a choir of crucifieds robustly singing, “For life is quite absurd, and death’s the final word,” is, at the very least, a sight and sound not easily forgotten. The song no less than preaches to the audience:

Life’s a laugh and death’s a joke, it’s true.
You’ll see it’s all a show;
Keep ’em laughing as you go.
Just remember that the last laugh is on you.

Finally, as the credits begin to roll, the song’s lead singer proclaims, “You come from nothing, you’re going back to nothing....Nothing will come from nothing....C’mon, give us a grin!”

The song (and therefore the film’s) upbeat nihilism has been noted by other commentators.³⁴ If *Life of Brian* has a message about the cross it is that the cross is foolishness—but not the same kind of foolishness that the Apostle Paul had in mind. *Brian*’s cross accomplishes nothing save for a tune to whistle as humanity heads toward the abyss. It’s Nietzsche but sunnier. What *does* kill you will make you funnier. To proclaim from the cross—that sign of eternal hope for two billion Christians—that “death’s the final word” is a sort of nihilistic *absconditus et revelatus sub contrario*: Nihilism hidden and revealed under its opposite. *Brian*’s

³³The grand finale can be viewed via Monty Python’s official YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/MontyPython#p/u/28/WBiLNN1NhQ>, accessed on February 18, 2012).

³⁴See, for example, Aubrey Malone, *Sacred Profanity: Spirituality at the Movies* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010) 48. I disagree with Malone’s claim that “*The Life of Brian* is not so much an iconoclastic work as a satire on the stuffiness of organized religion” (49). I contend that *Brian* is certainly a satire of organized religion and it is certainly an iconoclastic work, with the cross as the main icon being “clasted.” Malone observes that “Crucifixion jingles are hardly the answer to life’s eternal questions” (ibid.). Perhaps such jingles are not the answer for Malone, but it says something that “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” remains a top “alternative” choice for funeral music. See “Monty Python Classic Tops List of Best Funeral Songs,” *The Telegraph*, January 27, 2009, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/4352276/Monty-Python-classic-tops-list-of-best-funeral-songs.html> (accessed February 18, 2012). The song was sung at the funeral of Graham Chapman, the Monty Python member who played Brian. See “It’s...The Monty Python Story,” *The Life of Python*, DVD, directed by Mark Redhead (New York: A&E Home Video, 2000). Python member Eric Idle, who wrote the song, also wrote and performed an oratorio based in part on *Life of Brian*. A performance of Idle’s work at Royal Albert Hall can be seen in *Not the Messiah (He’s a Very Naughty Boy)*, DVD, directed by Aubrey Powell (London: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment UK, 2010). The oratorio’s sing-along version of “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/montypython#p/a/u/0/JrdEMERq8MA> (accessed on February 18, 2011). Yes, as the title indicates, the oratorio spoofs Handel’s *Messiah*.

finale is, in a way, the ultimate incongruence, a cognitive gap impossible to close, a breathtaking breach. It is verbal, situational, and dramatic irony all rolled up into one. It is capital “I” Irony. It makes you wonder if there’s such a thing as *adivine* inspiration. Like it or not, you have to hand it to Monty Python for their collective stroke of genius, for crafting a last word to beat all last words. Or you can simply point out one final irony, namely, that as the chorus winds down, nihilism itself is crucified.³⁵ ⊕

HANS WIERSMA is associate professor of religion at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

³⁵There may be one additional irony here. It seems that “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” doubles as sharp satire of various Christianities that attempt to utilize the cross as grounds for the power of positive thinking, a rosy view of earthly life, or a gospel of prosperity. Whatever the case, it’s fitting to permit a Python member to have the last word in this last citation. Looking back on the making of *Life of Brian*, John Cleese remarked, “God smiles on some projects and he smiled on that one,” in Robert Sellers, “Welease Brian,” *The Guardian*, March 27, 2003; at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2003/mar/28/artsfeatures1> (accessed February 18, 2012).