



God's Laughter: A Theological Reading of Woody Allen and Anne Sexton¹

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A priest, a poet, and Woody Allen walk into a bar. Or to be more precise, they sidle their way into an article for *Word & World*. The priest is Martin Luther and the poet is Anne Sexton. It's an unexpected set of conversation partners, to be sure. But they each have something to teach us about God through the imaginative idea of God's laughter. Humor, at least Woody Allen's sort of humor, always walks hand-in-hand with the bleakness of the human condition and deep questions about the nature of God. Such deep questions command the attention of a poet like Anne Sexton, whose tragic vision of life is mitigated by an intense awareness of its beauty. Further, the dual visions of God painted by Allen and Sexton call forth the consideration of a theologian like Martin Luther, who experienced a God both hidden and revealed.

God laughing is a highly anthropomorphized image, and, given the complexity of human life in a fallen world, it is not entirely clear whether such divine laughter would be compassionate, cruel, sardonic, or salvific. Does God laugh in derision, as the psalmist would have it (Ps 2:4)? Or does God laugh in delight, as we

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God laughs, we learn from Scripture, but is it the sardonic laughter of the cosmic trickster or the delighted laughter of the faithful lover? The unlikely trio of Woody Allen, Anne Sexton, and Martin Luther help us work through that question.

might imagine happening in those first joyful moments when God saw that creation was good? This article illuminates the nature and power of the idea of divine laughter in the face of the world's brokenness. With Woody Allen and Anne Sexton, we will explore images of a God who laughs—both as the cosmic joker and as the delightful lover—and then we will reconcile the two images with the help of Martin Luther's perception of God as simultaneously hidden and revealed.

GOD PLAYS A PRACTICAL JOKE

“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering” (Gen 22:2).

It should come as no surprise that God laughs in the mind of Woody Allen, whose cynical agnosticism lies behind some of the most brilliantly neurotic characters in cinema. In his midrash on Gen 22, Allen sets us up to contemplate the trickster God, God personified as the biggest practical joker of them all: “I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it....No sense of humor. I can't believe it.”² Woody Allen most likely didn't know that he was reading the binding of Isaac in the tradition of Martin Luther, who claimed in his sixteenth-century interpretation of Gen 22 that God was only playing sport with Abraham, like a father who teasingly takes the apple away from his child but secretly intends later to give the child the entire inheritance.³ This God is a cosmic jester, and the joke is on us. But it's a joke that seems undeserved. After Abraham's obedience in leaving his homeland and giving up his ancestral religion; after Sarah's surprised laughter, part delight and part disbelief, at the unexpected annunciation of their son Isaac (whose very name means laughter); after the tragic expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness where they were expected to die—after *all* of this, God decides to play one more joke on Abraham. And it seems like such a sadistic joke, one in which the father's ethical sensibilities and the beloved son's life are at stake. Yet, for both Martin Luther and Woody Allen, there's a surprising tenderness in God's behavior. In the end, just as Luther reminds us that the child will receive something far greater than an apple from his sporting father, Allen's Isaac is spared. Abraham is told to get some sleep, and God promises to check in with him in the morning.

But all is not perfectly resolved in Allen's version of the story. Clearly the discernment of spirits is not a problem for Abraham: the patriarch never doubts that the command is truly of God. When Sarah suggests that it was perhaps a friend playing a practical joke, Abraham responds with certainty that the voice was too resonant and well-modulated to belong to any human trickster. Yet, Abraham is denied a satisfying interpretation of his obedience to God's horrifying command: “But doth this not prove that I love thee, that I was willing to donate mine only

²Woody Allen, “The Scrolls,” in *Without Feathers* (New York: Random House, 1975) 24.

³Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 21–25* (1539–1540), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 4, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964) 116.

son on thy whim?' And the Lord said, 'It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice.'⁴ This God is one who deliberately engages with humans through subterfuge, seemingly for the sake of the trickery itself. It's hard to laugh when confronted with such a God.

Woody Allen would return to Gen 22 more than a decade later in his film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.⁵ The philosophical hero of the film, Professor Levy, confidently exegetes the story of Abraham and Isaac, concluding that humans are unable to conceive of a loving God and that the most anyone can honestly say is that the world is empty of meaning—except the meaning that we instill in it through acts of love for one another. These words sound nice enough from an existentialist perspective. But Woody Allen knows better, and so a few minutes later in the film Professor Levy commits suicide. Agnostic humanism in this case doesn't work. Once again, it seems, God has the last laugh.

Such a God's sense of humor comes at the expense of humans. Luther would call such a God the Deus absconditus, the hidden God.

We should, of course, remember that Woody Allen doesn't believe in God. He was making a theological claim as well as a joke when he asked, "How can I believe in God when just last week I got my tongue caught in the roller of an electric typewriter?"⁶ It's easy to imagine oneself the brunt of God's sadistic cosmic jokes (and to joke right back at that God) when one is ambivalent about whether such a God exists. It's harder for those who do believe in God to imagine such a thing. To recognize the voice of God amidst all the voices in this world should bring comfort and assurance. But to recognize the divine voice and *not* know whether it is trustworthy—such recognition is terrifying.

It should be noted that in Woody Allen's reading of Gen 22 God never explicitly laughs out loud. Indeed, this God sets up an elaborate practical joke and then appears disappointed when Abraham fails to understand the divine sense of humor. Allen's portrayal of God as a cosmic joker, whether the joke is rooted in sadism or tenderness, reads like a dark comedy. But it falls into the theologically suspect tradition of offhandedly explaining away human suffering with the phrase "God must have a sense of humor." To attribute to God sardonic laughter over human weaknesses and follies carries certain theological assumptions. Such a God appears to be more concerned with judging the foibles of a fallen humanity than with restoring the brokenness of the world or bridging the vast gulf between God and creation. Such a God doesn't sustain relationships of trust. Such a God's sense of

⁴Allen, "The Scrolls," 24.

⁵Woody Allen, writer and director, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, 1989 (Orion Pictures).

⁶Allen, *Without Feathers*, 5–6.

humor comes at the expense of humans. Luther would call such a God the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God. It is not the God we want, but it often seems to be the God we get.

GOD PLAYS POKER

The same year that Allen published his comedic exegesis of Gen 22, Anne Sexton published her poem “The Rowing Endeth,” which offers an image of divine laughter far more joyful than Allen’s view of God allows. In this poem, God is an island amidst the chaotic waters of life. Sexton arrives at the island’s fish-shaped dock at the end of days, exhausted and scarred from the journey, only to be invited into a game of poker with God. But this is a game in which everyone wins, for there is an unexpected wild card. And as Sexton grins over her royal flush, God begins to chuckle, heartily and lovingly:

He starts to laugh,
the laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth
and into mine,
and such laughter that He doubles right over me
laughing a Rejoice-Chorus at our two triumphs.
Then I laugh, the fishy dock laughs
the sea laughs. The Island laughs.
The Absurd laughs.⁷

Such delight! The poet envisions a divine laughter that is contagious, taking on a life of its own, like grace. And this grace is so pure and abundant that even the Absurd, that abstract entity which evokes Kierkegaardian despair, can respond with nothing less than laughter. Look! There’s a wild card, so everyone wins! At the end of the poem Sexton finds herself proclaiming in a cathartic moment of ecstasy: “Dearest dealer, / I with my royal straight flush, / love you so for your wild card, / that untamable, eternal, gut-driven *ha-ha* / and lucky love.”⁸ The wild card may be characterized as lucky, but it is not subject to mere chance. Rooted in the steadfastness of a trustworthy God, this loving laughter—or laughing Love—ensures the redemption of all whom it infects.

This poem is largely eschatological in its vision. The very last laugh, Sexton reminds us, is an abundantly joyful divine laughter. Even if God is hidden from our understanding in this life, God will be revealed in the end as pure grace, like an island floating absurdly amidst the choppy waters (waters that call to mind the primordial chaos of creation and the dangerous passage of baptism). As the laughter rolls out of God’s mouth and into ours like a giant hoop (like the word that goes forth from God’s mouth [Isa 55:11], or like the sweet scroll that the prophet ingests [Ezek 3:1–3]), a triumphant chorus of joy resounds across the waters. And in this

⁷Anne Sexton, “The Rowing Endeth,” in *The Awful Rowing toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) 85–86.

⁸Ibid.

gift of laughter is salvation: salvation from the chaotic journey that leaves us scarred and battered; salvation from the perception that God's grace is finite and there can only be one winner; salvation in knowing that alongside every worry about God's hiddenness is a revelation. The God who laughs with Anne Sexton delights in human successes rather than human failures. Such a God promises to overcome human suffering. Such a God inspires trust and evokes hope.

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But this optimistic view did not come easily to Sexton. The rest of the poems in this book dwell in images of war, madness, despair, cancer, martyrdom, child abuse, and the Holocaust. They primarily reveal the pain inherent in life, characterized in the book's title as an "awful rowing" toward God. It is only in "The Rowing Endeth"—the final poem in the book—that the poet can imagine herself reaching God's mercy, and in fact this was the last poem she published. Anne Sexton was someone who suffered deeply in life and it would be dishonest to write about this poem without telling the rest of the story, which is that she prepared the book for publication, revised the galleys one last time, and then went to her garage and asphyxiated herself with carbon monoxide. Perhaps the joyful image of God's laughter was not enough to mitigate the despair that Sexton felt. Or perhaps the joyful image of God's laughter was enough to convince her that she couldn't wait any longer before reaching the Island.

I include the story of Sexton's death not to undermine her blissful image of God's laughter. Such imagery points to a grace that is real. Rather, I include the story to demonstrate that there is great complexity in humans' perceptions of God: hidden and revealed, cosmic joker and delighted lover. Similarly, there is great complexity in humans' responses to the God whom they perceive: doubt and faith, comedy and despair. Some people are able to laugh cynically in the face of meaninglessness. Some people can perceive the depth of grace only in the midst of great sorrow. Most people fall somewhere in the middle. But all of us are called to negotiate the waters of life and discern God's voice in the struggle. This negotiation is not easy: it's beautiful and it's torturous, like rowing amidst chaotic waters toward an island where cosmic laughter promises to greet us.

GOD HIDDEN AND REVEALED

A theologian might remind us that to say that God laughs is no more accurate than to make claims about God's shoe size or God's preferred type of coffee. But the beauty of Anne Sexton and Woody Allen is that they push us to ask the question anyway: If there were such a thing as divine laughter, what would such laugh-

ter be? Would it be the cynical laughter of a Divine Joker whose tricks are supposed to teach us to survive in a painful and meaningless universe? Or would it be the joyful laughter of a playful God: one who lets everyone win in the end, one whose laughter rolls like a hoop out of his mouth and enlivens all who hear it?

Martin Luther would likely say that both images of divine laughter can appropriately teach us about God. He did believe in a God who is powerful enough to sport with us, smiling gently (while perhaps also rolling the divine eyes) at our lack of understanding while we learn about survival the hard way. But Luther's God was also mighty enough to laugh at the power of death and the gates of hell, blissfully triumphing over the powers that threaten to devour us. Accordingly, Luther's exegesis of Gen 22 rests upon the claim that Abraham drew the knife in faith because he trusted in God's promises—particularly the promise of the resurrection of the dead, which mimics the miracle of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), parallels the miracle of Sarah's conception in her old age, and culminates in the resurrection of Christ.⁹ But trusting in God's promises (more, responding to an asinine divine command out of such trust) will not protect the person of faith from encountering the hiddenness of God. Nevertheless, some deliberate strategies for dealing with God's hiddenness emerge from within Luther's theology.

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As Brian Gerrish has pointed out, there are two senses in which Luther perceives God as hidden: within revelation and outside of revelation.¹⁰ The God hidden within revelation is manifest in the form of weakness: born in a manger, raised in poverty, rejected by his peers, hung on a cross. From within such weakness God laughs against the power of death and thus overcomes it, enabling the Christian to laugh alongside God against the power of Satan, proclaiming "You will not prevail with your accusing and gloom-spreading, nay, rather, I also shall laugh with my God, for I know that your attempts are vain. . . . You assail not me alone, but Him who vanquished you, the Son of God."¹¹ This laughter, alongside the "jesting of the Divine Majesty in the matter of death,"¹² reveals the divine reality of power hidden in weakness and resembles the triumphant laughter of Anne Sexton's poker-playing

⁹Unlike most of the earlier church fathers, Luther avoids reading Gen 22 christologically. The closest he comes to such a reading is to acknowledge, rather begrudgingly, that the ram might be viewed as a symbol of Christ. According to Luther, Abraham believed that the sacrificed Isaac would be resurrected from the dead *not* because he had a premonition of the story of Christ, but simply because God had instructed the patriarchs in the doctrine of resurrection as a manifestation of God's power over death.

¹⁰See Brian Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982) 131–149.

¹¹Martin Luther, *Selected Psalms I*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 12, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955) 27.

¹²Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, 118.

God. But Woody Allen's portrait of God as a cosmic trickster calls to mind the possibility of a different sort of hiddenness of God. Allen's joker God is harmless enough on the surface, but points to deep issues of theodicy—just as getting one's tongue caught in a typewriter serves as a cipher for war, disease, famine, child abuse, and natural disasters. The idea of divine involvement in such events points to a hiddenness outside of revelation, wherein dwells a God incomprehensible to humans. For Luther, this hidden God damns sinners to hell while the revealed God weeps. Or in Allen's version of divine laughter, this hidden God risks the life of Isaac for the sake of a stupid joke while the revealed God promises to check in with Abraham in the morning.

There is, of course, only one God. And Luther would be the first to acknowledge that hiddenness and revelation are not ontological characteristics of God but simply ways in which we perceive God. The work of God that appears to us as alien, unjust, or cruel may be perfectly just and merciful in God's eyes. But perception is everything when trust in God is at stake. Accordingly, Luther wrote that the God hidden outside of revelation is *not* to be preached, worshiped, or adored. The Christian who attempts to inquire into "that hidden and awful will of God" is treading on forbidden territory, and such inquiry serves no pastoral or pedagogical function.¹³ Despite his rhetoric against it, however, there is a sense in which God's deepest, most frightening hiddenness pervades all of Luther's theology and exegesis. To combat the threat of a God hidden outside of revelation, Luther repeatedly found himself laughing—but it was a laughter fabricated for the purpose of spiritual battle rather than borne of spontaneous joy.

There is, however, even in the face of this abyss an abiding hope. This hope rests in the conviction that God's promises are trustworthy and that divine mercy is greater than divine judgment. Just as in Luther's sacramental theology the finite is said to hold the infinite, so too we might claim that the revealed God holds the hidden God—or that the cosmic joker is enveloped within (and thus contained by) a God whose laughter is pure love.¹⁴ In the end, for Luther, the final word was always joy. The revealed God triumphs. How can we help but love such a God, with his wild card and his untamable, eternal, gut-driven laughter?

THE PUNCH LINE

And yet, there will always be times in the Christian life when the hidden God rears its apophatic head. I think of Israel, a four-year-old in my congregation who is in remission from brain cancer. Issy's father writes in his online journal: "Issy is more tired than usual and we don't know why. Please keep praying for him. Yes, he is doing well, but I'm waiting for the punch line to smack me in the face."¹⁵ The

¹³Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1526), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 33, ed. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 139.

¹⁴Annie Dillard puts it this way: "His right hand is clenching, calm, round the exploding left hand of Holy the Firm," in *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 71.

¹⁵Cited with permission from the author.

punch line. Here again life is absurd, and God is the one controlling the joke. Pastorally, I'm not sure how to deal with this metaphor. I've known Issy since he was a baby and I laugh at his flirtatious grins on Sunday mornings and I know the grim statistics for his type of cancer. Does God write the punch line to this story, Issy's dad is asking, and what kind of punch line will it be? These are difficult questions. Our theological friends Woody Allen, Anne Sexton, and Martin Luther can't answer them for us with any certainty.

But we are called to negotiate the waters of life and discern God's voice in the struggle. And so one day our congregation found itself gathered around the font for an affirmation of Issy's baptism. He had been baptized earlier by a hospital chaplain during a panic-filled emergency, but the assembly now wished to celebrate his baptism together. So, on a Sunday morning, we gathered and rejoiced that right now he is cancer-free—and he laughed as I made the sign of the cross on his forehead and it was the most joyful I had ever seen that congregation. Somehow, we all knew that at that font God was laughing with Issy and rejoicing along with us, even while also weeping with Issy's mother as she held him.

In the end, Issy's most important punch line was in that moment, in that community gathered around the font rejoicing in his baptism and lamenting his illness. The punch line for Issy is that he doesn't have to row his boat alone the way Anne Sexton imagined the journey, he doesn't have to compete one-on-one with God in a game of poker, and he doesn't have to stand before God in solitary embarrassment the way Woody Allen imagines Abraham doing. The punch line is that there's a whole community with little Issy: facing the inexplicable and negotiating together those rough baptismal waters; finding beauty in the awful rowing toward God, perhaps even laughing along the way; and trusting that at the last we will meet not a sadistic joker but instead the one whose laughter rolls out like a hoop and enlivens us all. ⊕

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