



## Perspective

# Is This Place Stuffy, Or Is It Just Me?

JOHN S. MORREALL

What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously.

—Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>1</sup>

**D**o you remember the first time you went into a church? What feelings did you get from the building and the ceremonies? Would you say excitement or delight? Or would subdued or even bored be more accurate? As you got more familiar with the ceremonies, were you eager to get to them, and sorry when they were over? Did you arrive early to get as close to the front as possible? Or did you find that it was often hard to pay attention and that your thoughts drifted from what was going on right in front of you?

The idea that religion is boring is so common that some pastors even poke fun at themselves, as in this sign outside a church in Affton, Missouri:

SAINT DOMINIC SAVIO  
CATHOLIC CHURCH  
Masses 7 - 8:30 - 10 - 11:30 a.m.  
COME EARLY AND GET A BACK SEAT

Anyone in the clergy knows at least a dozen jokes about boring sermons. George Burns had this one: “A good sermon should have a good beginning and

<sup>1</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 56–57.

*Humor is a gift of God, but it can be lost through misleading interpretations of Christian faith, through deadening educational systems, or simply in the process of growing up. Recovering humor can bring us closer to the way God sees the world.*

good ending, and they should be as close together as possible.” Many people conclude from their experiences that religion is *supposed to be* boring. But that idea would have come as quite a surprise to Abraham, the biblical prophets, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, all of whom thought that life in relationship with God energized and empowered us.

Unfortunately, the way a religion turns out can be very different from what its founder intended. Christianity began as a religion forbidding violence, for example. Jesus said that we should “not resist the evildoer. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matt 5:39). And for the first three centuries, Christians were famously known throughout the Roman Empire as pacifists. But when Christianity became the state religion of that empire, soon Christian leaders like St. Augustine were inventing justifications for violence, even for wars against Christian groups with whom they disagreed. By 800 C.E., the “Holy Roman Empire” covered most of Europe and commanded large armies. Later came the Crusades and countless other religious wars. Yet, for Jesus, “religious war” and “Christian soldier” would have been oxymorons.

If Christians have strayed so far from Jesus’ teaching on an issue like violence, maybe they’ve also gotten other things wrong, like the solemnity in our churches. Somber Christians might take a look at Ps 150, which exhorts us to

Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!

Today’s Christians could also learn from the earliest Christians, for whom joy and laughter were central to spirituality. The event that changed Jesus’ followers from a scared, ragtag bunch into the first Christians was, after all, the flood of joy called Pentecost. St. Paul’s advice to his friends in Philippi was, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4:4). According to an old tradition in Eastern Christianity, Jesus’ friend Lazarus laughed for years after he was raised from the dead. Lazarus’s house in Bethany was even called “The House of Laughter.”

Today there are a number of signs that spiritually aware people are regaining an appreciation of joyfulness and even fun. In a 1988 *Newsweek* poll, 74 percent of Americans said that there would be humor in heaven. Several churches now have clown ministries. Some congregations incorporate laughter into their services; the best known is the Toronto Blessing.<sup>2</sup> The Fellowship of Merry Christians includes a wide spectrum of people, all committed to putting more joy into their lives.<sup>3</sup> If Jesus returned today, I’m sure that he’d feel more comfortable at one of their meetings than at a service that might put him to sleep.

<sup>2</sup>For more information on this, see <http://orthodoxinfo.com/inquirers/toronto.aspx> (accessed February 20, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>See their newsletter at <http://www.joyfulnoiseletter.com/index.asp> (accessed February 20, 2012).

## WHY ARE CHURCHES BORING?

One of the reasons many traditional churches were considered boring is that they thought of religion as a static set of beliefs and rituals. Instead of seeing the dynamic quality of spirituality, and living each day as a set of new opportunities, they plodded along in mental ruts. Some churches even congratulated themselves on having *the* correct ways of thinking and acting, as others wandered around in sin and darkness.

While European religions throughout history have not been particularly friendly to laughter, American Christianity has had an especially negative attitude toward it. Christianity came to this country on the *Mayflower* with the Puritans. What they wanted to “purify” was the Church of England, whose rituals they thought had too much color, music, and celebration. The Puritans settled on the rocky shores of New England, where they built simple white churches without decoration. In them they put a pulpit and straight-backed pews. Rituals were intentionally plain: someone read from the Bible and then gave a sermon. They wanted no fancy processions, colorful vestments, or anything else smacking of festivity.

Outside of church, the Puritans did not permit singing, dancing, and other forms of entertainment. When their cousins back in England came to political power in the mid-1600s, they closed the theaters. Stage plays produce laughter, they argued, which is inappropriate for Christians, who should not be “immoderately tickled with mere lascivious vanities, or...lash out into excessive cachinnations [laughter] in the public view of dissolute graceless persons.”<sup>4</sup>

With festivity banned, what did the Puritans have to look forward to? The answer: lots of hard work! These were America’s original workaholics. Everyone, they believed, is born polluted by the sin of Adam, and deserves to burn in hell for all eternity. Most people—Puritans included—will end up there. But God, in His mercy, has chosen to save some.

Since everyone is depraved, the Puritans asked themselves, is there any way to tell who will be saved? They determined that those whose work was successful are more likely to be saved. So, wanting some sign that they were in that group, most Puritans worked very hard. Preachers gave sermons praising hard work as a virtue. The “Protestant work ethic” was born, and we live under it still.

For most Americans today, work is what gives life structure and meaning. Life is not a garden to relax in or an adventurous journey to enjoy. It is a job or, better yet, a lot of jobs. The good person is the hard worker who gets all their jobs done. From the Puritans on, Americans have taught this ethic to their children. Many have also believed that play is the opposite of work, and so have been suspicious of play in anyone old enough to do work, that is, anyone old enough to go to school. Even when our kids play, as in hitting a home run or painting a picture for Mom, we praise them by saying, “Good *job!*”

<sup>4</sup>William Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix: The Player’s Scourge or Actor’s Tragedy*, vol. 1 (London, 1633) 293.

Christian countries like Italy and France never went through a Puritan stage and never made work into the meaning of life. So they still have room for music, art, and pleasant conversation in their daily life. They have leisure. In America, “leisure” is often seen as a negative rather than a positive idea: it is time away from work, time for resting in order to get ready for more work. If the Puritans had read their Bibles carefully, however, they would not have found their work ethic there. The Decalogue contains no commandment to work, but it does have one forbidding work on the Sabbath. They would also have found no ban on celebration. As we have seen, Ps 150 encourages us to praise God with dance that is accompanied by a full orchestra of trumpets, lyres, harps, timbrels, strings, pipes, and clanging cymbals.

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The Puritans should also have read the works of Calvin more carefully. “We are nowhere forbidden to laugh,” Calvin wrote in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “or to be satisfied with food...or to be delighted with music, or to drink wine.”<sup>5</sup> He also said, “There is not one little blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make men rejoice.”<sup>6</sup>

Once we think carefully about the Puritans, then we can see that there is nothing particularly Christian or religious about their workaholicism and joylessness. In fact, workaholicism and joylessness crush real spirituality.

## THE EFFECT OF EDUCATION

To overcome the traditional prejudices against humor and playfulness, we need to undo a considerable part of our education (at least if we went to standard schools). And so we need to become more like the kids we used to be. Our culture’s workaholicism is naturally linked to its prejudice against humor, as we have seen, because humor is a kind of play, and in our culture play is often treated as the opposite of work. Before they get to school, children laugh hundreds of times a day. After graduating from high school or college, they will laugh about fifteen times a day.<sup>7</sup> The basic lesson in any school is that life entails “getting our work done,” and that means becoming humorless, joyless, and solemn. “Kidding around”—or any other form of being a kid—is out.

I still remember the first thing a teacher ever said to me, in the first week of

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Christopher Mark O’Brien, *Fermenting Revolution: How to Drink Beer and Save the World* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 2006) 28.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Thomas F. Tierney, *The Value of Convenience: A Genealogy of Technical Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) 128.

<sup>7</sup>This statistic appears in a study by German psychologist Michael Titze, cited by (among others) Lotte Mikkelsen at <http://www.unitedmind.co.uk/laughforreason.php> (accessed February 20, 2012).

first grade: “What’s so *funny*, Mr. Morreall?” That was supposed to be a crusher, but I wasn’t used to sarcasm, so I naively answered her: “There’s a big *bug* in Tommy’s desk!” This answer made her even madder, of course. I learned a valuable lesson that day, one that would apply to the rest of my education: if I wanted to succeed, I had to repress the natural impulses of childhood. Laughter would have to be on the sly or after school. Kids who are good at art may be sent to the art room, and kids who are good at music may go to the music room, but kids with a good sense of humor are sent to the principal’s office.

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This suppression of “kidding” is remarkably effective. Between kindergarten and adulthood, we lose not only hundreds of laughs a day, but related traits like emotional range. While young children have at least a dozen faces, many adults limp through life with just two or three faces. I’ve worked with leading figures in religion, business, medicine, and education who had a single face for all occasions—Professional Cool.

Also squelched along with humor and playfulness are imagination and mental flexibility. Four-year-old children who are creative and full of neat ideas quickly get into mental ruts and learn to think dull thoughts as they grow older. In his classic book on creativity, *A Whack on the Side of the Head*, Roger von Oech tells of something that happened in his tenth-grade English class.<sup>8</sup> The teacher came in, picked up a piece of chalk, and put a large dot on the blackboard.

“What’s that?” she asked. Of course, by tenth grade most students don’t volunteer to answer any questions. Moments passed, but then one student said, “It’s a dot on the blackboard.”

“Good,” she said, “Any *other* answers?” But trained to finding *the* answer to any question, and the *right* answer, the students had no other ideas.

Then the teacher explained that she had done the same exercise the day before in a kindergarten class, and they had come up with fifty answers—it’s a owl’s eye, a cigar butt, a star, a bug, and on and on. Certainly the tenth graders had learned a lot that the kindergartners did not know, but in the process they had also lost a lot—especially creativity and enthusiasm.

I once took a three-year-old to a county fair. It was crowded, so I had her up on my shoulder. She spotted a vendor selling cotton candy.

“I want some, I want some,” she said. Turning around, I asked, “*What* do you want, Amanda?”

“Ice cream fur,” she answered.

<sup>8</sup>Roger von Oech, *A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative* (New York: Business Plus, 2008) 36.

What a great name for that spun sugar in a cone! I've tried to write poetry and have never come up with anything that good. But as we walked over to get ourselves some ice cream fur, I wondered how long Amanda would keep her creative spirit. Past first grade? Past junior high?

Unfortunately, most schools are only too successful in changing bright, inquisitive, imaginative, playful children into the dull workaholics we see all around us. As educator Neil Postman said, "Children enter school as question marks and leave as periods."<sup>9</sup> For most kids, "growing up" means learning to see life as most adults see it—as "one damned thing after another."

If we don't want this to happen to our children or grandchildren, and if we want to enrich our own lives, we have to relearn doing things for their own sake rather than for their usefulness. Kids don't have our hang-ups about accomplishing something all the time. They choose activities that are ends rather than means. Another name for those activities is "play." The remarkable thing about play is that while children are not out to accomplish anything by playing, they accomplish a great deal. Most significantly, they learn a lot. In what five years of your life did you learn the most? Wasn't it your first five, when you learned to walk, talk, eat, get along with people, and countless other skills? And in what five years did you play and laugh the most? Wasn't it those same five years?

Once we call the prejudice against play into question, we see how wrong it was from the beginning. Our greatest art, drama, and music, after all, are forms of play. We "play" music. Performances of drama are called "plays." Religious rituals are not usually thought of as a kind of play, but they are. With their music, color, and drama, they are designed to be appreciated by eye, ear, and mind. Heaven itself will be play, not work.

When kids come to religion, their natural tendency is to not leave their playfulness behind. Often, their spirituality has the joyful attitude found in the psalms. After interviewing three hundred children across the United States, Associated Press Religion Editor David Briggs noted, "When Christian children were asked to draw pictures of God, God and Jesus were invariably smiling."<sup>10</sup> There is a lesson here for us adults.

## THEORIES OF HUMOR

### *The incongruity theory*

So far we've been talking about humor as a kind of play, but we haven't specified what kind of play. I've been studying humor for thirty years and find that the most useful theory of humor is the incongruity theory. It says that humor is playing with incongruity. "Incongruity" is a fancy word for a simple idea: something

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Von Oech, *Whack*, 35.

<sup>10</sup>David Briggs, "Bless the Child: The Faith of Children Gives Hope," *Houston Chronicle*, April 22, 1995; at [http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl/1995\\_1269838/bless-the-child-the-faith-of-children-gives-hope.html](http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl/1995_1269838/bless-the-child-the-faith-of-children-gives-hope.html) (accessed February 8, 2012).

that doesn't fit our ideas of what is normal. A thing or event is incongruous if it doesn't match our expectations. So one definition of humor is having your train of thought derailed, and enjoying the mental jolt you get.

Our washing machine wasn't working last week, so I took our dirty laundry to a laundromat. As I was loading the washer, I noticed a large sign on the wall:

WHEN MACHINE STOPS, PLEASE REMOVE YOUR CLOTHES

I laughed out loud.

Being incongruous isn't enough to make something funny. Sometimes when we're surprised, we don't laugh but get scared or angry. In humor we *play with*, we *enjoy* the incongruity. When I laughed at the sign in the laundromat, it was because I had thought up an incongruous meaning for it—I pictured people waiting for the machine to stop spinning and then stripping off their clothes.

Speaking of incongruous signs, I once drove past a church that had two signs. One, over the front door, said "Church of God." The other, on the front lawn, said "For Sale by Owner." As these two ideas came crashing together in my head, I laughed as I thought, "*He's short of money, too?*" Again, what triggered my laughter was a mental jolt that I enjoyed.

To test the incongruity theory for yourself, try this. Stand on your tiptoes with your arms raised high in the air. Shout, "I'm totally depressed!" Did you laugh? Why? The Incongruity Theory would say that your body language was all wrong for the message being expressed. The words didn't go with the gesture. You might test the Incongruity Theory on other things you find funny. After you laugh, ask if you were surprised by something abnormal, and if you enjoyed the experience.

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***God has given us a special ability that is given to no other creature on earth: to mentally step back from life's incongruities and enjoy them. He has given us a sense of humor.***

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When you think about it, it's a feat for anyone to be able to enjoy having their expectations violated. Humans are alone among the animals in this ability. You can dress up in a funny costume in front of your cat, for example, but your cat won't laugh. When animals experience something surprising, they react with disorientation or fear, not laughter. Why are we the only animals that laugh? Because we're the only ones able to rise above our personal, practical points of view to see things from a higher perspective. For a moment, we're not concerned that things didn't go the way we expected. Instead of being bothered by what surprised us, we relax and take delight in it.

#### *The mental distance theory*

I call that rising above our personal, practical point of view "mental distance" and it takes several forms. Sometimes it involves physical distance. When you read

in the newspaper about something that happened in Paris or Tokyo, for example, you might laugh, even though you wouldn't laugh if it had happened closer to home. Mental distance can also be distance in time. When you get together with old friends, many of the things you laugh about from years ago didn't seem funny as they were happening. But now that they're safely in the past, you can relax and laugh about them.

Another kind of mental distance I call "personal distance." This is the difference between one person and another. It's usually easier for me to laugh about incongruities in someone else's life than to laugh about incongruities in my own life, because I don't have to live with all the practical consequences. Think, for example, of how we laugh at the problems of characters in movies, even though those characters are too emotionally involved in their problems to laugh themselves.

I once read a story in a newspaper entitled "Courthouse Toilets Explode After Lines Get Crossed." It explained how two dozen toilets and urinals had exploded in a Seattle courthouse when an air compressor was mistakenly connected to a water line. The last line of the article was, "No injuries were reported, although several people apparently were soaked."

I've presented this story to hundreds of audiences, and it always gets laughs. But why aren't people bothered by the explosion, even stressed out by it? The answer is mental distance. Though the people in the Seattle courthouse in 1989 were not laughing as their toilets blew up, the people I tell the story to have the personal distance and the distance of time and space to relax and enjoy the incongruity of exploding toilets.

We experience incongruities every day, and most of them are potentially threatening. Ninety percent of the time when things don't happen as we thought they would, it's because we got less than we expected—not more. If we experienced everything up close, many days would bring too much to bear. But God has given us a special ability that is given to no other creature on earth: to mentally step back from life's incongruities and enjoy them. He has given us a sense of humor. Charlie Chaplin, using the language of film-making, put it this way: "Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in longshot." The fact that God's perspective is the biggest longshot of all suggests how God sees the world. ⊕

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