



Karl Barth: Comic Warrior¹

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Karl Barth has an undeserved reputation in some circles as a misanthropic stick-in-the-mud, based on an equally undeserved caricature of Barth as the anachronistic opponent of all things good and beautiful. References to his sly sense of humor are therefore often met with puzzled stutters. His work is read “with a Teutonic lack of humour,” T. F. Torrance observes, in spite of “the silver thread of sheer fun that runs throughout his account of the theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”² While Barth once complained about Calvin’s seeming inability to laugh,³ this is certainly *not* a problem one encounters with Barth himself, who devoted eight full pages of the *Church Dogmatics* to a facetious book review of the 1740 *Insecto-Theologia* and an analysis of eighteenth-century hymns that portray God as, in Barth’s words, “the supreme Giver of so much cheese.” The following will explore Barth’s comic response to modern theological trends.

¹An earlier version of this essay appeared as “‘Too Dogmatic for Words?’ Karl Barth’s Comic Theology in Dialogue with Craig Ferguson,” *Religion & Culture Web Forum*, Martin Marty Center (February 2011); at <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/webforum/022011/DeCou%20Too%20Dogmatic%20for%20Words%20Final.pdf> (accessed February 9, 2012).

²T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910–1931* (London: SCM, 1962) 24.

³Karl Barth, *Ethics*, ed. D. Braun, trans. G. W. Bromiley (New York: Seabury, 1981) 512.

Only a serious theologian could have turned out the number of weighty tomes produced by Karl Barth. Only a person with a capacity for self-deprecating humor could have termed these his “little pushcart of Dogmatics.” As it turns out, Barth’s humor is evident throughout his work, especially in its eschatological perspective that refuses to take the present with ultimate seriousness.

BARTH'S THEOLOGY OF HUMOR

According to M. Conrad Hyers, the comic hero interprets the slings and arrows of life “more in terms of a *game* than a battle,” preventing the deification of the human so prevalent in warrior tales.⁴ However, it is precisely by “being frankly human” that comedy “has something of the divine—the truly cosmic—perspective in it.”⁵ Hyers cites Barth as an example of one who views the significance of his theological work from this cosmic-comic perspective, recognizing the fallibility of all human thinking, including his own. On the other hand, John Morreall cites Barth as evidence that theology has utterly neglected humor, for even his vast *Dogmatics* “gives about a page to humor’s connection with humility”⁶ (in fact, the page count is almost *twice* that!).

In the discussion of “freedom in limitation” to which Morreall points, Barth lists humor along with gratitude and humility as the proper response to the honor that God accords to humans, the radical incongruity of which is the source of spiritual laughter.⁷ This brief remark, however, is not all Barth has to say on the subject, exploring humor not only in terms of limitation, but as a form of liberation as well. Indeed, he is far more concerned with humor than a cursory reading of his work might suggest, believing it “a pity” that modern reflections on human nature do not consider it “worthy of mention that man is apparently the only being accustomed to laugh and smoke!”⁸

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Because both limitation and liberation are central themes in his eschatology, Barth’s most concentrated account of humor appears in the eschatological passages of the *Ethics*, where he claims that “our conduct bears the mark of good, of what is pleasing to God, when it is not done in earnest but in *play*.”⁹ As that which exemplifies play, humor is the “attitude that is ultimately demanded in all that we do” (510). Humor refuses to take the present with ultimate seriousness, eliciting “liberated laughter that derives from the knowledge of our final position—in spite of appearances to the contrary—within present reality” (511). This incongruity be-

⁴M. Conrad Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996) 66. Italics original.

⁵*Ibid.*, 62.

⁶John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999) 118.

⁷Barth, *Church Dogmatics (CD)* III/4, ed. T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961) 665. The “incongruity theory” of humor sees laughter arising from the juxtaposition of opposites (e.g., logical absurdities, socially inappropriate pairings). See John Morreall’s essay in this issue: “Is This Place Stuffy, or Is It Just Me?” *Word & World* 32/2 (2012) 178–185.

⁸Barth, *CD* III/2, 83.

⁹Barth, *Ethics*, 503–504. Italics original. Barth’s discussion of humor is found in *Ethics*, 510–512.

tween present and future reveals humor to be the proper response to the true seriousness of God's work. Humor, like play, does not require that we take nothing seriously at all. Rather, we take the present "seriously within the bracket...not because it is not serious enough in itself, but because God's future, which breaks into the present, is more serious" (511). For Barth, genuine humor is always grim, offering "liberation and release" from the tears of present suffering (507). It is most often self-directed, but when it aims at others it does so without malevolence. Humor becomes "false" when it maliciously targets others, speaking with "poison and gall" rather than liberation and release (511).

Clearly liberation and limitation are closely related. Humor liberates us graciously to accept our limitations in light of our final position in the eschatological future. In Barth's view, human limitation is a benefit, lending urgency to each life as a unique opportunity. Complaining about our limits betrays a desire to be gods rather than to live happily as creatures. Playing on this tendency therefore proves a successful strategy for demons, "which falsely depress us and rob us of our humour by persuading us that the natural limits of our physical and psychological existence are a constriction...when we are really borne, sustained and even uplifted by God within these limits."¹⁰ Humorlessness is an offense.

We need not be ashamed before the holiness of God if we can still laugh and must laugh again, but only if we allow laughter to wither away, and above all if we have relapsed into a sadly ironic smile....for it surely conceals an evil superiority, a wholly inadmissible resistance to the divine revelation, which so illumines the created world that it demands our brightest and not an obstinately clouded Yes.¹¹

Such humorlessness is a frequent complaint of Barth's, as one who seems exceptionally averse to boredom. For example, his rejection of natural theology includes the claim that its observations always seem "profoundly tedious and so utterly unmusical."¹² Similarly, his frustration with the debate over Bultmann's hermeneutics reached its peak when he realized that it had become "too dogmatic for words" and hopelessly "bogged down in sterility and boredom."¹³

The humorlessness wrought by demons (and bad theology) stands in stark contrast to the robust humor of God. In Job, for example, Barth detects the divine sense of humor in the refusal to lecture according to the standards of academic theology: "He might preach and lecture, and how well He could do it!" but God also "has the transcendent freedom to speak very differently, and the humour to make powerful use of this freedom," moving off on "what seems to be an unexpected tangent to every thoughtful person." And yet this comic mode of discourse is pre-

¹⁰Barth, *CD* III/3, 529.

¹¹Barth, *CD* III/1, 371.

¹²Barth, *CD* II/1, 666.

¹³Barth, "Rudolph Bultmann—An Attempt to Understand Him" in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H. W. Bartsch, trans. R. H. Fuller, vol. 2 (London: SPCK, 1972) 131, 132.

cisely what allows God to speak “intelligibly and convincingly.”¹⁴ Such humor comes through in the divine being and attributes as well, and theologies that overlook this always exude “something joyless, without sparkle or humour, not to say tedious and there finally neither persuasive nor convincing.”¹⁵ Here again, Barth links humor with genuinely persuasive discourse.

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If we take a moment to consider Barth’s writings on Mozart and Schleiermacher, we can see the role that the comic acceptance of incongruity plays in his thought more generally, even where explicit reference to humor is absent. Barth appreciates the joyful embrace of incongruity in Mozart’s free and playful music, noting “the Mozartean ‘center’ is not like that of the great theologian Schleiermacher—a matter of balance, neutrality, and, finally, indifference,” but rather it is “a glorious upsetting of the balance, a *turning* in which the light rises and the shadows fall, though without disappearing, in which joy overtakes sorrow without extinguishing it, in which the Yea rings louder than the ever-present Nay.”¹⁶

Conversely, while Barth admires Schleiermacher’s ability to laugh at himself, he criticizes the apparent aversion to incongruity evident in Schleiermacher’s conception of synthesis as an undifferentiated unity between finite and infinite. Here, the good of salvation is found “not in a *relation* between God and man but in their *undifferentiatedness*.”¹⁷ Schleiermacher’s syntheses dissolved individuality and thus contributed to a situation in which theology could be wholly absorbed into modern culture: “The difference between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” Barth declares, “is that there is now a counterattack.”¹⁸

THE COMIC WARRIOR?

Given Barth’s view of humor as a constitutive element of persuasive discourse, it is not surprising that he employs it so frequently in this counterattack against modern theological trends, often displaying the qualities Hyers ascribes to comic discourse: “overstatements and understatements, curious coincidences,

¹⁴Barth, *CD IV/3*, 430.

¹⁵Barth, *CD II/1*, 655.

¹⁶Barth, “Mozart’s Freedom,” in Barth’s *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, trans. C. K. Pott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 55.

¹⁷Barth, “Schleiermacher,” in *Theology and Church*, trans. L.P. Smith (London: SCM, 1962) 173. Italics original.

¹⁸Barth, “Interview von Mr. Lemon,” *Gespräche 1959–1962*, ed. E. Busch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1995) 446. The translations of *Gespräche* in this article are the author’s.

miscellaneous reports, gossipy asides, raised eyebrows, ironic observations, tongue-in-cheek interpretations, winkings and whisperings.”¹⁹

One of Barth’s most memorable analyses is found in an excursus on eighteenth-century optimism, in *CD III/1*. Here he traces the work of Leibniz to its application in Lesser’s 1740 *Insecto-Theologia*: “This was not a joke, for in the same style and dimensions the same author has also given us a theological lithology and testacæology” (that is, theologies of rocks and shell-bearing mollusks).²⁰ According to Barth’s description, insects reveal this to be the best of all possible worlds in, for example, “their capacity for self-protection and defence, which reminds the author of everything written in the Psalms about God’s protection of the just.” With playful sarcasm, Barth quotes the text extensively and carefully rehearses Lesser’s praise of insectile virtues, his reports on the dog-sized ants of Turkey, and his catalog of scriptural insects. However, “the problem of theodicy is vigorously tackled,” Barth observes, for “the author knows perfectly well that insects can also be harmful, and he faces the fact unflinchingly.” But, ever the optimist, Lesser follows this with a chapter on our successful fight against insects, “which is both instructive and encouraging” (399).

Barth then explores the “downward evolution” (404) of Leibnizian optimism through its more egregious application in the hymns of A. Kyburtz on the subject of Alpine cows and the cheese made from their milk, praising the natural world and “its direct or indirect edibility” (403). Of course, Barth acknowledges the distance between understanding God as the perfect creator of the best possible world and understanding God “as the supreme Giver of so much cheese” (403). Nevertheless:

Once we have boarded this train, we find that it is a non-stop express and we must accept the fact that sooner or later we shall reach the terminus. And we can take comfort in the principle of the school—if the application may be permitted—that imperfection is integral and even essential to creaturely perfection, and serves only to increase it. As the world would not be the world, and God Himself would not be God, without metaphysical, physical and moral evil, so even according to his own teaching Leibniz would not have been Leibniz without Brockes and Kyburtz.²¹

Barth’s relating of Kyburtz to Leibniz “according to his own teaching” reveals his delight in meting out “comic justice.”²² Still, he admits that this optimism bears some resemblance to genuine Christian hope and “does in fact give us pleasure even if in a different sense from what its author foresaw.” He is therefore not surprised that his beloved Mozart emerged from the same century and concedes that even “Lesser’s book—apart from the information which he gathered ‘with and

¹⁹Hyers, *Spirituality*, 3.

²⁰See *CD III/1*, 396–403.

²¹*Ibid.*, 404.

²²For a description of “comic justice,” see Hyers, *Spirituality*, 82.

without magnifying glasses’—is not without certain elements of purposeful ingenuity,” qualities we must remember “before we frown and grumble; otherwise we might easily put ourselves in the wrong even in relation to Kyburtz, let alone Leibniz” (404). As is often the case, Barth concludes the critique with his own brand of optimism.

Barth’s critical writings have left him with a reputation as less than charitable, due in no small part to his robust sense of humor and combative style. He himself acknowledged that “the ink-bottle is as much a danger to the Barth family as the wine-bottle is to others.”²³ Though his scathing criticisms may seem to violate his own criteria for genuine humor, Torrance argues that Barth’s frequent self-directed humor mitigates this aggressive wit, allowing him to target others “in such a way that he can appreciate their intention and respect their persons and their sincerity.”²⁴

On the other hand, Ralph C. Wood warns that emphasizing Barth’s “counterattack” explains why his work fell out of fashion and altogether misses the point. Barth’s purpose was “not to pummel secularized modernity,” but rather to evoke the glad tidings of reconciliation. Barth’s joyfulness did not arise from his “natively ebullient spirit” alone, but from the gladness of the gospel message.²⁵

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However, Barth’s native ebullience and his natural combativeness are closely related, evident in the diary entries of his misspent youth: “Today I did a good deal of bashing up and got bashed up by plenty of people myself. There really is some splendid poetry in this active and passive.”²⁶ His *Kriegserklärung* (declaration of war) against modern theology illustrates his fondness for martial turns of phrase,²⁷ and his English, learned from detective novels, was dominated by “a criminal vocabulary.”²⁸ Though he claimed that old age had led him to a greater appreciation

²³Letter to H. Scholz, 24 May 1953. Cited in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 26.

²⁴T. F. Torrance, “Introduction,” in Barth’s *Theology and Church; Shorter Writings, 1920–1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 9. Examples of Barth’s self-directed humor include: the self-mocking depiction of his “little pushcart of Dogmatics” (*How I Changed My Mind* [Richmond: John Knox, 1966] 14), his feigned astonishment that “the kingdom of God simply will not accommodate itself to my teaching methods, whatever strategems I try” (Letter to Thurneysen, 14 Dec 1919 [cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 66]), and his confession that not only could he expect no *special* heavenly recognition, but “even whether I will receive the common aurea is more than worrisome and questionable” (Letter to Thurneysen, 2 March 1926).

²⁵Ralph C. Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 34, 35.

²⁶Diary entry from 21 January 1899. Cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 25.

²⁷Letter from 18 May 1921 in *Karl Barth—Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, ed. E. Thurneysen (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973) 489. Author’s translation.

²⁸Barth, “Interview von J. Elson” (1962), *Gespräche 1959–1962*, 445.

for flexibility and compromise, he insisted that even his later shift in emphasis from God as wholly other to the humanity of God was not a *Rückzug* (retreat) but a continuation of his *Angriff* (attack) on modern theology.²⁹ Therefore, while John Updike notes Barth's "humor and love of combat" together as evidence that he was genuinely "indulgent of this world,"³⁰ these two characteristics also reveal comic qualities in his theology.

Barth complained that modern theology lacked eschatological vision, leaving it unable to revolt against the powers that unjustly bind humanity. He therefore launched a "counterattack" against powerful theological trends in order to "counterbalance the humanism of the nineteenth century, when men were overconfident in their own ability to run the world."³¹ Hyers's view of the role of humor in relation to theology is illuminating here:

To take oneself seriously *as a human being* is to laugh, for that which is taken in all sincerity and good faith as being ultimate is taken as such by human beings inhabiting this or that culture in this or that moment of time. Even the interpretation of faith as an ultimate and unconditional concern (e.g., Paul Tillich) has an aura of ultimate and unconditional seriousness about it that human beings cannot give to their concerns without absolutizing their experiences and perceptions.³²

Barth uses humor to create a *diastasis* between theology and culture and to remind theology of its human nature, its concepts often grounded in nothing more than philosophical fashions or cultural taboos. Theology must recognize all human thinking as provisional and avoid turning cultural conceptions of optimism, progress, etc. into idols, which means dedicating itself to the revealed word above all other human constructs.

Of course, Barth does not intend to come at theology from some superior position, always including himself in the claim that theologians are never equal to their task. Indeed, Hyers praises Barth's comic perspective in his exploration of the jester, whose task "is humorously to profane the categories and hierarchies with which we would capture the ultimate truth about things," refusing "to take any human pretensions or demarcations with absolute seriousness" and realizing that "the moat that defines and protects the king's castle is also the moat that imprisons the king."³³ Like the jester, Barth held that all human activity had to be "disenchanted of its secret divinity"³⁴ in order to achieve genuine human freedom. He hoped to free theology from "sulky faces, morose thoughts, and boring ways of speaking"³⁵ by providing what Hyers calls "a full recognition of human limitations

²⁹Barth, *Die Menschlichkeit Gottes* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956) 7; *The Humanity of God*, trans. J. N. Thomas and T. Wieser (Richmond: Westminster John Knox, 1960) 41.

³⁰John Updike, foreword to *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, 7.

³¹Barth, "Pressekonferenz in Chicago" (1962), in *Gespräche 1959–1962*, 450.

³²Hyers, *Spirituality*, 127–128. Italics original.

³³*Ibid.*, 129.

³⁴Torrance, "Introduction," 22f.

³⁵Barth, *CD II/1*, 656.

and hence a sense of perspective relative to those lofty portraits and painted pretensions.”³⁶ That he often employed biting humor was not only a matter of crafting persuasive rhetoric but an expression of his refusal to take any element of human culture (including theology) or any individual (including himself) too seriously.

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Though Hyers juxtaposes the values of the warrior against those of the comic hero,³⁷ we see that Barth deftly joins the two in his theological discourse. On the one hand, in claiming that theology must be wholly dedicated to the word, he defends the virtues Hyers ascribes to the warrior, such as “unquestioning loyalty and obedience, inflexible conviction, unswerving dedication.” Moreover, some view his willingness to go against the stream as evidence of “indomitable will, passionate involvement, uncompromising determination.” On the other hand, emphasizing limitation and humility, Barth argues for the very virtues Hyers credits to comic heroism, such as “flexibility, freedom, compromise.” His eschatological writings hold that the necessary attitude of the children of God is one of “playfulness, light-heartedness, childlikeness” (the virtues he found in Mozart). And like the comic hero, Barth sees human activity as a *game* “played better and more successfully, the more it is recognized as a game.”³⁸

The Christian life itself combines these virtues, treading the narrow gate between present threats and eschatological hope. As one of humor and combat, this life could be described as that of the *comic warrior*, characterized by the incongruities of free obedience, indomitable humility, and serious play. Humor itself becomes a crucial weapon in the eschatological revolt against injustice.

Barth’s theology reveals itself as comic in its particular combination of eschatological hope and pointed criticism, the former serving as the motivation for and goal of the latter. Together, they function as a revolt against modern pretensions waged through the humor that emerges “when we wrestle with this seriousness of the present,” while recognizing that “we cannot be totally serious as the children of God.”³⁹ These writings exemplify the qualities of the comic warrior, expressing hope and eliciting laughter in the very skirmishes through which he strove to cut a new path for theology.

³⁶Hyers, *Spirituality*, 105.

³⁷Hyers, *Spirituality*, 64–67.

³⁸Barth, “Church and Culture,” in *Theology and Church*, 349.

³⁹Barth, *Ethics*, 511.

Because both humor and revolt are inspired by eschatological hope, Barth's counterattacks typically conclude with the expectation of eschatological armistice, as illustrated in his musings about his future meeting with Schleiermacher:

The only certain consolation which remains for me is to rejoice that in the kingdom of heaven I will be able to discuss all these questions with Schleiermacher extensively...for, let us say, a couple of centuries....I can imagine that that will be a very serious matter for both sides, but also that we will both laugh very heartily at ourselves.⁴⁰

In the midst of battle, Barth anticipates a happy ending. ⊕

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⁴⁰Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, ed. D. Ritschl, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 277.