

# **‘Are Not our Hearts Burning’: Laughing with God in a Postmodern World**

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[T]he holy book we call the Bible revels in a profound laughter, a divine and human laughter that is endemic to the whole narrative of creation, fall and salvation, and finally a laughter that results in a wondrous, all-encompassing comic vision. (J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee)<sup>1</sup>  
For everything there is a season... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance (Eccl 3: 1, 4).

## **Introduction<sup>2</sup>**

When I first went to Papua New Guinea in the late 1960s I was initially overwhelmed by the fact that there were only three million people, but five hundred languages, plus several thousand dialects. How could three anthropologists possibly establish a pastoral research unit in such linguistic complexity! A wise colleague looked at me and said: ‘Gerry, for heaven’s sake, see the funny side of this. Laugh because God is laughing! Ultimately, God is in charge. Not us! Don’t take yourself too seriously.’ What wonderful advice. If God is laughing at this incongruous situation, then surely I must also. The wise advice kept me sane.

You say to yourselves – how do I know God is laughing? That is surely one of the best kept secrets of our Christian faith. After all, St John Chrysostom said that laughter is a thing of the devil. Surely I cannot equate God with the devil. Well, John was wrong. How do I know? Simply by a better understanding of the Scriptures. Humor is perhaps the most powerful method of communicating serious information. And without humor we cannot remain sane. Mahatma Gandhi was right when he said: ‘A sense of humor is the pole that adds balance to our steps as we walk the tightrope of life. If I had not sense of humor, I would long ago have committed suicide.’ For this reason we must surely expect to find humor in the Scriptures. And it is there in abundance. In fact humor is at the very heart of our salvation story. Even the story of Emmaus, which is the catalyst for his lecture, has powerful comic elements. But before we get to that, we need to take a closer look at what humor is.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee, ‘Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions’, ed. J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Comedy in the Bible*, *Semeia*, no. 32 (1985) 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> The theme of this lecture is more fully developed in the author’s book *Laughing with God: Humor, Culture and Transformation*, to be published by The Liturgical Press in January 2008.

In this paper I will:

- Define the meaning of humor and what is meant by divine humor;
- Illustrate how Jesus frequently used humor as a pedagogical method;
- Explain the many joking patterns in the Scriptures;
- Suggest some of the personal and pastoral implications of the paper.

## **Defining Humor**

Have you ever wondered what happens when we laugh? Consider a large official notice on a building: ‘Trespassers will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law’, signed ‘The Sisters of Mercy’. Or what about the sign outside the maternity ward: ‘No children allowed!’ Or what about the student essay that recorded: ‘Abraham Lincoln’s mother died in infancy, and he was born in a log cabin which he built with his own hands!’ The answer to the question of what happens when we laugh at a good joke – we relax. And when we relax we are able to briefly see things in a different light. So, humor is subversive. It gives us space to think of alternative ways of thinking and acting. When humor pokes fun at the oppressive stringencies and conventions of society people have the chance to re-imagine alternative ways of behaving.

But what is at the heart of humor? Humor evades an easy description. And the challenge is made more difficult because there are no universally accepted definitions or views on the topic. W.C. Fields (1880-1946), the great American comedian, succinctly summarizes the problem: ‘The funniest thing about comedy is that you never know why people laugh. I know what makes them laugh, but trying to get your hands on why is like trying to pick an eel out of a tub of water.’<sup>3</sup> Humor, I believe, emerges from the contradiction or incongruous clash of ‘double meanings’, evoked by two differing definitions of the same reality. Woody Allen joked that: ‘I am not afraid to die; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.’ The first phrase states the predictable notion, but the second introduces the unpredictable meaning that is inconsistent with what we would expect. It is the surprising nature of the incongruity and its joy-evoking resolution that evokes humor.

It is not necessary, however, that a person actually laughs or smiles at something funny. On the contrary an inner feeling of joy, peace, renewed energy may at times be a far more important indicator of a sense of humor than physical laughter. It is this inner peace or joy that I call ‘laughter of the heart’. Far more important is the interior change of the heart. So, to define a sense of humor: A sense of humor is the aptitude within us which sets up the dynamic process of contemplating the incongruities of life. This process may be expressed in actions, speech, literature, or other art forms, resulting in

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<sup>3</sup> W.C. Fields quoted by F. Scott Spencer, ‘Those Riotous – Yet Righteous – Foremothers of Jesus: exploring Matthew’s Comic Genealogy’, ed. Athalya Brenner, *Are We Amused? Humour About Women in the Biblical Worlds* (London: T & T Clark International, 2003) 9.

surprisingly new resolutions of these incongruities. Humor is positive when it respects the dignity of people; negative when it is unkindly or degrades people.

### **Divine Humor**

Since surprising incongruity is at the heart of humor, I believe divine humor pervades the Scriptures. We call the actions of God towards us divine humor because they incongruously diverge from our human expectations of how God should relate to us. People expected the Messiah as a king to be born in princely splendour, but Mary gave birth to him in a stable. God comes to us as a vulnerable baby born to a socially lowly mother, is accepted by only a few followers, and redeems the world by crucifixion as a politically and religiously dangerous person and subsequent resurrection.

We may expect God to be a distant person, demanding punishment for our waywardness. Yet God's vulnerable side is love, not condemnation. We are pursued by his love in ways that from our human perspective are wildly illogical and nonsensical. God has an overwhelming and abiding love for each one of us, despite our frailties and sinfulness. Even though we 'may forget,' this love, says God our Parent, 'yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands' (Isa 49:15-16). Can anything be more incongruous, more humanly surprising, more worthy of celebration! Rejecting worldly wisdom and signs, God chooses to save those who believe through the foolishness of the preaching of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:21). All these incongruities are expressions of divine humor. We are called to contemplate such a divine paradox through the eyes of faith and come to experience, even in this vale of tears, 'an indescribable and glorious joy' (1 Pet 8), that is the hope-filled laughter of the heart.

Let me develop this further. There is the constant tension between justice, which requires that the Israelites be punished for breaking the covenant, and Yahweh's forgiving mercy towards them. What wins – punishment for sins or mercy? Everything humanly points to the former, but that is not how God will act. In Jeremiah Yahweh vividly describes the sinful state of Israel because it has broken the covenant: 'Your hurt is incurable, your wound is grievous...for I have dealt you the blow of an enemy, the punishment of a merciless foe, because your guilt is great, because your sins are so numerous'(vv.12, 14). But here is the comedic irony. Despite this well-deserved condemnation, Yahweh will forgive his people their sinful ways. The impossible gives way to the possible. Mercy overshadows justice. The last word is clemency: 'For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal... And you shall be my people, and I shall be your God' (Jer 30:17-8).

God is our Parent who will not abandon us, who pursues us in Christ with a love beyond all our possible dreaming. This is the ultimate in divine foolishness: that we are God's children, revealed through God's human face – Christ: 'When we cry, "Abba! Father!"...we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs

with Christ' (Rom 8:15-17). As any parent loves a child, God as our Parent is not a revengeful, but a merciful, loving One.

When we laugh at our own follies, we are laughing in our hearts with God. Our laughter 'is praise of God because it is a gentle echo of God's laughter, of the laughter that pronounces judgment on all history.'<sup>4</sup> Ultimately we can come to know our laughing God, as far as this is possible to humankind on earth, by being transformed into the image of Christ, the visible presence of the Father. We know this transformation is happening when we are struggling to have the same mind 'that was in Christ Jesus' (Phil 2:5): respecting the dignity of others and the universe, loving one another, acting justly and with mercy in the midst of a postmodern world that commonly considers such values a sign of weakness. We are then 'fools for the sake of Christ' (1 Cor 4:10), joining in God's laughter.

### **Laughter of the Heart**

Let me briefly return to 'laughter of the heart'. Recall that a positive sense of humor is the gift whereby we kindly contemplate the incongruities of life and express this meditative reflection in laughter, smiling or simply an inner joy or peace. In the Scriptures audible laughter is exceptional. However, we find people who contemplate the many acts of divine humor and seek to mirror this humor in their own lives. This evokes inner joy, or 'laughter of the heart', coming from their faith in God's paradoxical love for them and humankind.

John the Baptist 'leaped with joy' (Luke 1:44) when meeting Jesus while still in his mother's womb. The shepherds receive the joyful news of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:10). Earlier Mary, having accepted the call of God to be the mother of Jesus, is so moved with joy at this divine act of humor that she travels many miles through bandit territory to share her pleasure with her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-40). Elizabeth acknowledges this joy and Mary then replies in praise of God. Ponder the words of the disciples at the end of their Emmaus journey: 'Did not our hearts burn within us' (Luke 24: 32). That was laughter of the heart.

### **Humor as a Pedagogical Method**

Observers would be forgiven for concluding that many of our homilies and our rituals of Christian worship are obliged to be gloomy or joyless. Cardinal Walter Kasper correctly comments: 'One of the main elements of Christian faith is...humour, and the lack of humour and irritability into which we in the contemporary Church and contemporary theology have so often slipped is perhaps one of the most serious objections which can be brought against present-day Christianity.'<sup>5</sup> The incongruous situation is that Jesus Christ uses humor so often as a pedagogical method, yet we have forgotten this.

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, ed. Albert Raffelt, The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons and Meditations (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 112.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Kasper, A Introduction to Christian Faith (London: Burns & Oates, 1980) 131-32.

Some incidents in the life of Jesus display a comic quality. The wedding feast of Cana (John 2: 1-11) contains several humorous plots. It is ironical that the first miracle recorded in John's gospel revealing Jesus' divine power is the changing of water into wine (John 2:11). One might humanly have expected something more dramatic and directly concerned with the salvation of souls, yet divine humour is not confined by human hopes. Second, not only was the new wine of superior quality, but the amount of wine that the miracle produced was so abundant that the couple could have set up a wine shop with the surplus!

Jesus is never described as laughing, but he uses many images as ways of teaching that would have been comical to himself and his listeners. For example, when Jesus described how difficult it is for rich people, who are attached to their wealth and the power it gives them, to enter the kingdom of God, he used the image of a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:25). The poor among his listeners would have chuckled at this metaphor with its satirical description of the selfish wealthy people they would have seen.

Actions are for Jesus the most powerful form of preaching his mission. Since paradoxically so many of these actions go against the norms of the culture of the time, they would have evoked mocking laughter in those who resisted conversion and the laughter of the heart or inner joy in people open to transformation.

Here are some examples. First, he associates with Samaritans. The Jews looked on Samaritans in a racist manner, believing them to be innately stupid, lazy and heretical. And the Samaritans had similar views of their Jewish neighbours. But Jesus goes out of his way to converse with Samaritans, as he did with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:9). The Good Samaritan is proposed as an example of love of one's neighbour (Luke 10:33-7). Only one of ten lepers whom Jesus healed came back to thank him and he was a Samaritan (Luke 17: 16).

Secondly, Jesus befriends people who are marginalized. Contrary to the behaviour of the Pharisees, Jesus associates with 'sinners' such as tax-collectors, that is, with those who are publicly known to be violators of the Jewish moral and ritual code (Luke 15:1-3).

Thirdly, Jesus acknowledges gender equality. According to Jewish culture women were considered inferior to men and conversing with them in public was socially forbidden. However, often in his daily life Jesus expresses concern for the welfare of women, but in ways that are not condescending or prejudiced; he heals sick women (e.g. Mark 1:29-31; Matt 9:18-26) and forgives sinners among them.

## **Joking Patterns in the Scriptures**

All cultures have rituals of initiation often termed ‘rites of passage’, or ‘rites of life’s transitions’. There are many such rituals in the Scriptures. They refer to particular rituals which mark the progress of an individual or group between relatively stable, generally recognized states of rank, status, office, calling or profession.

Now, here is the surprising fact. Initiation rituals follow a joking pattern. Let me explain.

In joking definite, lighthearted cues are given to audiences to indicate that a joke is about to take place. The ordinary pattern of living is about to be interrupted. It might be done in a formal way, for example, by comments such as, “Have you heard this one?” Or it might be by a sudden change in the voice or facial expression of the joke teller, even a pause in the flow of speech.

Then there follows the clash of meanings. There is the incongruous situation in which two contrary meaning systems are in conflict. People are temporarily thrown into chaos and incongruities are resolved when a relationship is seen to be meaningful in a previously overlooked way. The crust of conformity is momentarily broken and creative energy is released. In rituals of initiation we call these three stages: separation, the chaos stage, and then reaggregation. In rites of transition there is, as in joking, a letting go of one meaning and the acquisition of a totally different one – a transforming journey of detachment from once acceptable behavior and the embrace of new ways of thinking and acting. Speaking of this kind of transition St Paul writes: ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child...; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways’ (1 Cor 13: 11).

Among the many examples of joking rituals in the Scriptures are the Transfiguration, the apostles caught in a storm, the Emmaus event, and the Ascension.

### **The Transfiguration**

The Transfiguration is to be a ritual of initiation for Peter, James and John; they are to experience in a spectacular way the true identity of Jesus as the Messiah and also the nature of his mission. The separation phase is the ascent of the mountain (Luke 9:28); this is to remind the disciples that something extraordinarily important is to take place on the mountain top, the liminal space. Jesus at prayer is suddenly and radically altered: ‘and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white’ (Matt 17:2). Moses and Elijah, representing the Israelite law and the prophets, converse with Jesus about his passion that is to occur at Jerusalem. As they begin to disappear Peter is terrified at what is happening and wants to control the situation.

In the midst of such an intensely powerful, supernatural experience Peter is so distracted that he amusingly wants to build three tents. Peter and his colleagues must allow their faith in Jesus to overcome their human fears of the future. It is also comical

that in the midst of such an extraordinary event Luke reports that they are ‘weighed down with sleep’ (Luke 9: 32). Moses, Elijah and Jesus are thought to be of equal importance by Peter, but it takes the intervention of God the Father to remind Peter that Jesus is the prophet because Jesus is God’s Son. Again, the disciples are reminded that they must abandon any idea that Jesus is merely a human prophet.

The liminal experience of transcendence is to continue no matter how much Peter fears what is happening: ‘While he is still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him”’(Matt 17:5). Jesus is superior to the other two great messengers, Moses and Elijah who, as they represent the old covenant that is to end, leave the scene. The disciples must now listen to Christ as the voice of God.

The re-aggregation phase is symbolised by the disciples’ discovery that Christ is now alone, back to his normal physical self. They descend from the mountain, numbed by the experience (Matt 17: 7-8).

### **Emmaus Story**

The Emmaus event unfolds according to a clear tripartite pattern of initiation.<sup>6</sup> In the separation stage two former followers of Jesus are moving away from Jerusalem, escaping from the place in which their hopes of Jesus as a political revolutionary have been irrevocably crushed (Luke 24:13-25). They cannot take any more! Deeply disappointed, they have had enough!

Then the chaos stage. Jesus, the skilful grief and initiation leader, joins them, but they fail to recognize him. Their inability to identify Jesus is caused more by spiritual blindness on their part than by anything unusual about Jesus’ appearance. This fact adds to the drama of the event, for it highlights their need for conversion. Jesus, pretending to be ignorant of the reasons for the sadness of the two travellers, invites them to express their feelings: ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad’ (Luke 24:17).

This is a comic scene. All their anger and sadness tumble out at great speed, leaving them breathless. They had wanted Jesus to expel their Roman oppressors (Luke 24:21). Jesus listens patiently to them before he begins to challenge them. Now they must make a choice: continue to run away dreaming of a dictatorial military-minded savior, or accept what has been said and move forward out of chaos into the future in faith and hope. They must let go their false understanding of Jesus and embrace the true meaning of the Messiah. They choose Christ and experience fellowship with him, their supper guest, and a laughter of the heart that words cannot fully articulate: ‘They said to each other, “Were

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<sup>6</sup> See Gerald A. Arbuckle, From Chaos to Mission: Refounding Religious Life Formation (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995) 123.

not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32).

To mark the re-aggregation stage, the two disciples testify to their radical conversion by enthusiastically returning to Jerusalem to share their experience with the faith community there (Luke 24:33-35).

### **The Ascension of Jesus**

The account of the Ascension of Jesus' risen glorious body into heaven contains three distinct phases. Even at the very end of his life on earth Jesus invites his disciples to join him in his final transformative phase. He has frequently told them that he is leaving the world and 'going to the Father' (John 16:28): 'for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you' (John 16:7). Despite the fact that Jesus repeats himself the disciples fail to hear. They are so attached to the physical presence of Jesus that they become trapped in the liminal state; they will need to be encouraged through faith to let Jesus go in order for them to become his witnesses in the world.

The separation stage is marked by a definite break from the scene in which Jesus appears to his disciples to reassure them that he has truly risen from the dead and to leave them final instructions, including his command to carry on his mission (Luke 24:36-49). He then 'led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them' (Luke 24:50). Luke identifies the site in the Acts of the Apostles as Mount Olivet (Acts 1:12). Olivet is one of those exposed liminal sites, like the road to Emmaus, symbolizing that Jesus is calling his disciples to enter into a conversion experience: 'he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight' (Acts 1:9). The cloud symbolizes the presence of God and reaffirms for the disciples that something beyond the normal is occurring.

The scene shifts to the disciples, with Luke as narrator describing an incongruous situation. The disciples are stunned by the experience and keep looking up to the sky hoping that Jesus will return. Their fear is further intensified by the sudden appearance of 'two men in white robes' (Acts 1:10). The angels unexpectedly appear to challenge them to resolve their fears of the unpredictable by reaffirming their faith in the return of Jesus at an unknown time in the future (Acts 1:11). They now make a firm act of faith and return to Jerusalem to await the coming of the Spirit. The actual movement away from Olivet is the reaggregation stage. Sustained by the transforming experience of the Ascension they will await the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost with the supportive prayer of their faith community that includes 'Mary mother of Jesus' (Acts 1:14).

### **Missioners as Gospel Comedians**

All good comedians like Charlie Chaplin, Groucho Marx, Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers, John Cleese (of Monty Python and Fawlty Towers fame) have one thing in common. They are able to touch the hearts of their audiences. They project in their behaviour society's fundamental incongruities or tensions such as order and disorder,

good and evil, life and death, hope and despair, sadness and joy. From a position of social powerlessness, they are able at the same time to transcend these incongruities. Like biblical prophets, they hold out irrepressible hope for humanity that life is not necessarily preordained towards defeat, collapse and tragedy, that fate is conquerable. They do not just condemn the world of status, wealth, power manipulation and violence, but in some way provide us with a feeling of hope. Think of Charlie Chaplin. He refused to be crushed by the pomposity and arrogance of government officials; in fact such figures were reduced to objects of fun and even pity.

Peter Berger, in his book *A Rumor of Angels*, asserts that humor is a revelation of transcendence, a cautious call to redemption and for this reason ‘the actions of a clown take on a sacramental dignity.’<sup>7</sup> Such is the role of Christ himself. St Paul describes the same role for himself to the fractious Corinthians. He is a clown of Christ, without social status and power: ‘We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise... We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute... We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day’ (1 Cor 4: 10, 13). There have been other holy comedians down through the ages who perfectly exemplify the qualities of a true comedian, people like the Old Testament prophets, St Benedict, St Francis, St Catherine of Siena, Mary Ward, Dorothy Day. And now there are yourselves – called to be contemporary Gospel comedians!

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude with a brief summary and some personal and pastoral applications.

Humor is especially relevant in today’s world of escalating fear and violence. It is necessary for one’s own sanity and as the foundation of our preaching and pastoral life.

The holy book is filled with humor. It is the story of divine incongruity – God’s pursuing and forgiving love of fickle humankind. God keeps relating to us in humanly illogical ways that we describe this as divine humor. We expect God to be a distant creator, one who is revengeful because we are so wayward, but the opposite is the case (Isa 58:9).

And there are humorous incidents aplenty in the Scriptures. And laughter of the heart, that is the inner joyous spirit of those who are transformed by God’s love, is manifestly present throughout. Jesus Christ, the master teacher, uses humor in its various forms as his main method of teaching, especially in his parables. Human pride, pomposity, selfishness and avarice are all the objects of his deflating power sense of humor.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969) 114.

Consider its personal value. The more one knows oneself, the more one sees oneself as a joke, when measured by the love and mercy of God. As Soren Kierkegaard, a Lutheran theologian of humor, says, ‘the more thoroughly and substantially a human being exists, the more he will discover the comical’.<sup>8</sup> Any endeavor to cover over our faults and stupidities is an example of incongruity and therefore a reason to laugh at oneself.

We can identify with the ‘disabled God’ of Gethsemane, be comforted as Jesus was by the Father. It is this mystery of divine humor that keeps us grounded in hope. When we find it difficult to forgive ourselves for our foolishness and others for the hurts they have caused us, we turn to God, and discover he has forgiven us time and time again (see Col 3:13). That is divine foolishness. We can do the same. Then ‘the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding’ (Phil 4:7) will enter the depths of our hearts healing them of all pain.

Consider its pastoral importance. The world at all levels – secular and religious – is threatened by the over-seriousness of fundamentalists. They may be economic rationalists who unquestioningly support neo-capitalism with its underlying belief in the dollar as the measure of all success. They may be Catholic restorationists in our midst, Muslims, Hindus, Israelis, who believe they alone have the fullness of divine truth and that their task is to impose this on others in whatever way possible, including emotional and physical violence. If only fundamentalists could laugh at themselves, at their own rigidities and arrogance, the world would be a better place! Kindly humor is the best cure for fundamentalism or any form of intolerance. It deflates pomposity and inflated egos. A society or religion is at peace with itself will not only allow, but foster, a public humor that is self-critical.

When I first went to Papua New Guinea I had to be reminded of divine humor is at the heart of mission. There is Church because there is the mission of God, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a foundation of sending love. I am but an instrument of God’s mission. That is divine humor. The world of mission does not depend only on me!

When we fail to remember this, when we are tempted to be despondent over the paucity of vocations, the restorationist movements in the Church, then it is the time to take note and join in God’s gracious, kindly and forgiving laughter. Then our hearts will burn anew within me with relief! God is in charge. What a relief! Benedict XVI, in a lighter tone, says: ‘I think it’s very important to be able to see the funny side of life and its joyful dimension and not to take everything too tragically. I’d say it’s necessary for my

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<sup>8</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, quoted by Wylie Sypher, *Comedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956) 196.

ministry.’<sup>9</sup> And Soren Kierkegaard, ‘Comic perception frees me to transcend my tragic seriousness by beholding it as finite, hence not absolute.’<sup>10</sup> How true!

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<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI reported in The Tablet, 19 August (2006) 9.

<sup>10</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, The Humor of Kierkegaard, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 32.