

Humor Reconsidered: The Cultivation of “Accurate Perception” as a Contribution to the Care of Souls

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Abstract Cultivating a sense of humor that has redemptive possibilities for the soul in a post-Christendom era is an important but nonetheless risky act of pastoral ministry. Humor, like the soul, involves ambiguity, incongruity and paradox. Insufficient appreciation of the paradoxical nature of humor contributes to views that are both overly suspicious as well as insufficiently cautious where humor is concerned. A redemptive sense of humor is explored as a virtue analogous to the Greek virtue of *eutrapelia* in tension with *bomocholia* (buffoonery/flippancy) and *agroikia* (boorishness/excessive seriousness). The work of Erik and Joan Erikson on the needed tension between the syntonic and dystonic further clarifies how humor best serves the soul. I conclude that the willingness to cultivate a sense of humor is an act of faith.

Keywords Care of souls · *Bomocholia* · *Agroikia* · *Eutrapelia*

Introduction

We take arms against a sea of troubles, buttressed by the spirit of Milton, Bacon, Voltaire, Goethe and Jefferson. But what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture’s being drained by laughter?

Neil Postman (1985), *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

While it may be the case ... that all humor has an aggressive element, some humor is morally offensive and it is altogether appropriate that religion would disapprove of it.

Donald Capps (2006), “Religion and Humor: Estranged Bedfellows”

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Donald Capps and humor: A brief overview

In recent years no one has done more than Donald Capps to urge us to embrace humor as a vital aspect of religion and theology. I am deeply indebted to him for stirring my interest in the religious importance and pastoral uses of humor. The above quote from Capps suggesting that there are some forms of humor of which religion would rightly disapprove is admittedly a minor refrain in his overall outlook regarding the relationship of humor and religion. It is, nonetheless, an important insight. In what follows I want to amplify it toward the end of deepening our understanding of the role humor should play in the pastoral work I am identifying as the care of souls. As background for the argument that I want to advance regarding humor, a brief overview of Capps's work in this area may be helpful.

In the opening paragraphs of "The Melancholy Boy and the Religion of Humor: The Case of S.S. Adams," Capps (2009) traces for us the scholarly arc of his reflections on humor. The groundwork for much of what followed was laid in *Men, Religion, and Melancholia* (Capps 1997). There he argued that male melancholia originates in 3 to 5 year old boys as they undergo separation from their mothers and that this melancholia-producing separation is the genesis of male religiousness.

Two forms of religion grow to address a man's melancholia. In *Men and Their Religion: Honor, Hope and Humor* Capps (2002) identified them as "the religion of honor" and "the religion of hope." Then Capps's interest in humor surfaced as he identified a third way in which boys become religious, what he called "the religion of humor." Granting the peculiarities of the religion of humor, as compared to the moral rectitude involved in the religion of honor and the personal quest involved in the religion of hope, Capps nonetheless asserted its distinct value. When honor and hope are not producing their desired results, the religion of humor is there to lend a hand.

A few years passed as Capps immersed himself more and more in serious humor research, including the collecting and reading of numerous joke books! Then came *A Time to Laugh: The Religion of Humor* (Capps 2005), which not only developed in considerably greater detail Capps's understanding of humor as a religious option, but also landed him in the crosshairs of religious pop culture as it led to an interview with *The Wittenburg Door* (August 2006). In *A Time to Laugh* Capps identified five contributions that humor is prepared to make to traditional religion. One of these, the contribution of humor to the maintenance of the soul, has become my particular interest.

In subsequent articles, particularly "Religion and Humor: Estranged Bedfellows," Capps (2006) has sought to show why religion and humor have been at odds and why this need not be the case. His discussion in that article of the legitimate and illegitimate grounds for religion's mistrust of humor influenced me greatly as I sought to identify a "next step" in the discussion of the religious importance and pastoral uses of humor.

Most recently, *Laughter Ever After... Ministry of Good Humor* (Capps 2008) appeared as a popularly written handbook for those interested in advancing humor as a ministerial art form and thereby diminishing the estrangement of humor from religion.

My proposal

No one who ventures into the vast amount of literature now available on the relationship of humor and religion can be anything but grateful to Donald Capps. Because of his work in this area humor cannot be ignored as a vital element in the religious life and the care of souls. He has more than made the case for why humor and religion need not be "estranged bedfellows."

Especially important to me has been the implication in Capps's work that the cultivation of a sense of humor has much to contribute to the care of souls. In what follows I attempt to retrieve the language of the "care of souls" as a fundamental description of pastoral ministry. I explore the role of humor in the care of souls, in part, by drawing on the work of Erik and Joan Erikson pertaining to the relationship of the syntonic and dystonic, as well as the Eriksonian meaning of the phrase "a sense of"—concepts I first encountered in graduate school courses with Donald Capps some years ago.

Thanks to the work of Capps and others, humor can no longer be ignored or dismissed by theologians. That said I believe that we are now at a place where it is both necessary and possible to reconsider the role of humor as it relates to the care of souls. Like the soul, humor involves ambiguity, incongruity and paradox. I argue that insufficient appreciation of the paradoxical nature of humor contributes to views that are both overly suspicious as well as insufficiently cautious where humor is concerned. In our ongoing consideration of the religious importance and pastoral uses of humor, I am proposing a reconsideration of humor along the lines of what the Eriksons referred to as "accurate perception," searching for a balanced middle ground for humor to occupy in a post-Christendom church.

I believe that the time has come to interject a word of caution into the discussion of the pastoral and theological significance of humor. Humor, which I loosely define as the ability to have fun and to make fun, is grounded in paradox. Its paradoxical nature is captured in a prayer by the Reverend Ted Loder (1984) in which he asks that he might be granted an outlook by which he can appreciate: "that life is never quite as serious as I suppose, yet more precious than I dare take for granted." Loder goes on to pray that he might grasp the "sublime in the ridiculous and the ridiculous in the sublime" (p. 27). This seems to me a helpful way of underscoring that the redemptive power of humor to restore the soul rests, paradoxically, on our willingness to give it neither too little nor too much of a place where things religious are concerned.

Searching for the most balanced possible view of the pastoral and religious significance of humor will be an avenue to a more specific concern. It is a concern that is implicit in Capps's work on humor, but deserves more explicit attention: *articulating what the cultivation of a redemptive sense of humor can contribute to the care of souls*. A useful articulation of this sort will require several things: an argument for the recovery of *soul* as a meaningful theological and psychological term, an argument for the recovery of the "care of souls" as an apt description for pastoral ministry in the 21st century, an argument for *cultivation* as an apt metaphor for care itself, and a distinction between humor *per se* and what it means to have a "sense of humor" that is redemptive. It is not possible here to address all of these matters in detail. However, I believe that some brief references to the work of others regarding the recovery of soul and "the care of souls" can set the stage for a fruitful examination of what the cultivation of a redemptive sense of humor entails.

The paradoxical nature of the soul

Herbert Anderson (1994) has been helpful in bringing the meaning of both soul and the care of souls to greater clarity. Soul, he points out, is a description of the totality of a person, implying the multiple dimensions of body/mind/spirit/physical/emotional/cognitive/religious, etc. It is more accurate, therefore, to say "we *are* a soul" than "we *have* a soul" (pp. 208–209).

Conceiving of "soul" holistically presses us to take both the physical and metaphysical aspects of who we are with equal seriousness. We are neither "merely organic" nor are we

“virtually angelic.” Anderson (2001) borrows imagery from Thomas Moore to assert that as souls we are comprised of a piece of the sky and a chunk of the earth (p. 209). To recover the language of the soul we therefore have to recover paradox (p. 213).

This recovery is especially important because “lost souls” frequently bring to a situation a longing for simplicity, looking for that “one thing” that will ease their discomfort. Fundamentalistic impulses, from both the right and the left of religious life, are therefore tragic in the damage they do to the soul. According to Thomas Moore (1992), “the tragedy of fundamentalism in any context is its capacity to freeze life into a solid cube of meaning” (p. 236). The care of souls involves empowering people to live more comfortably with paradox, appreciating that two apparently contradictory things can at the same time be true. Possessing a sense of humor involves the capacity to hold these paradoxical elements lightly, letting go of neither while examining both with a gentle curiosity.

The care of souls

To describe the soul as a paradoxical tension—human beings as both a piece of sky and a chunk of earth—is already to discern the contours of the ministry of the care of souls. If “soul” is used to describe the whole person, both individually and communally, physically and metaphysically, then the “care of souls” describes a ministry to the whole person. It is a ministry that cares about how people live (the physical), the choices they make (the moral), and what they worship (the spiritual).

Irenaeus captured this focus in his phrase *Gloria enim Dei vivens homo*: “The Glory of God is the human being fully alive.” Commenting on this insight Elizabeth Johnson (2000) writes:

Because God is the creator, redeemer and lover of the world, God’s own honor is at stake in human happiness. Wherever human beings are violated, diminished, or have their lives drained away, God’s glory is dimmed and dishonored. Wherever human beings are quickened to fuller and richer life, God’s glory is enhanced (p. 14).

The ministry of the care of souls always bends toward the quickening of fuller and richer human life.

Over the past 2 years at Trinity Lutheran Seminary where I teach, we transformed the course formerly titled “Introduction to Pastoral Care and Counseling” into a course now called “The Care of Souls.” In doing so we followed a conviction that recovering the language of “soul” helps us to receive people as more than their problems, more than their symptoms. The focus of the course has expanded to consider not only the treatment of what is inhibiting life, but also the enhancement of those things that cause life (Gunderson and Pray 2006). Along the way we have endeavored to stay mindful of Thomas Moore’s (1992) observation that “the soul has no room in which to present itself if we continually fill all the gaps with bogus activities” (p. 122). “Like an animal,” he writes, “the soul feeds on whatever grows in its immediate environment” (p. 203).

Moore’s insights about the soul have led me back to Neil Postman’s (1985) signature work, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Postman argues convincingly that Aldous Huxley’s vision of a *Brave New World* poses a much greater risk to the soul of society than George Orwell’s nightmare of a world dominated by “Big Brother.” Orwell put us on guard against oppression imposed from without. “An Orwellian world,” Postman argues, “is much easier to recognize, and oppose, than a Huxleyan” (p. 156) one because we are more ready to resist forces that would control

us through pain than we are to resist those that would control us through pleasure. We rouse ourselves to oppose external domination and the sea of troubles it stirs. “But who,” asks Postman, “is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture’s being drained by laughter?” (p. 156). One of my chief concerns in what follows is to clarify that not all that is delivered to us under the name of humor deserves this exalted and life-giving designation. In the world of humor, redemption and ridicule live millimeters apart. When we take upon ourselves the ministry of the care of souls, it is incumbent upon us to be able to discern the difference between the two.

Cultivating: The care of souls in action

We will return later to the delights and dangers of humor. But first I want to ask, what does the care of souls look like when it is happening? Is there a metaphor that captures its essence? Is there a verb that can describe its activity? Throughout the ages the most prevalent answer to these questions has been *shepherding*. The literature on shepherding is voluminous and it is not my point here to attempt a review of it. I will confine myself to two points. First, because it is the predominant biblical metaphor for ministry (it would be redundant to say “pastoral” ministry), shepherding cannot and should not be set aside altogether in favor of something more “modern” or “relevant.” Jesus identified himself as a shepherd (John 10:10) and instructed those called to further his ministry to be the same (John 21:15–17). If for no other reason, Jesus’ reminder that good shepherds are called to lives of sacrifice, perhaps even the ultimate sacrifice, the metaphor of shepherding must not be abandoned. Caring for souls is that serious. It can involve love to the point of death.

But my second point is this: shepherding is not the only biblical metaphor for ministry. And in twenty-first century North American culture—the only culture about which I am qualified to comment and the only culture on which I am attempting to comment—it is certainly not the most relevant. Never mind that few of us have fed, cared for, or even touched a sheep. The fact is, as one of my students recently pointed out, sheep are not house pets. They are raised for consumption, and the more those seeking care think about it, the more they are likely to appreciate other metaphors that describe ministerial activity.

I want to invite attention to *cultivating* as a metaphor for the care of souls.¹ While perhaps not as prevalent as shepherding, there are ample biblical images that depict cultivating nonetheless. Israel is portrayed as a vineyard, God as the vinedresser (Is. 5:1–7, Jer. 2:21, Ez. 19:10–14, Hos. 10:1). The parables of the sower (Mt. 13:1–9, Mk. 4:1–9, Lk. 8:4–8), the weeds and the wheat (Mt. 13: 24–30), the seed growing secretly (Mk. 4:26–29), the laborers in the vineyard (Mt. 20:1–13), the fig tree that gets fertilizer and a second chance (Lk. 13:6–9), and the vineyard owner and his wicked tenants (Mt. 21:33–46, Mk. 12:1–12, Lk. 20:9–19) all lift up the processes of tending, growing, and harvesting as aspects of divine care for us and, by implication, for our care for one another. Perhaps the most compelling feature of cultivating, though, is its resonance with the core motif of Christian theology: dying and rising. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). This is the

¹ See Kornfeld 2002.

great paradox of the Christian faith: To save life is to lose it. Yet to lose life for the sake of the good news and the One who incarnates it is to find life (Mk. 8:35).

My preference for the metaphor of cultivating grows out of its literal meaning: to promote growth, to improve, develop, refine. Cultivating is especially useful because of its longstanding usage as a transitive verb with one or another virtue as its direct object. Cultivating allows us to stress that there are particular characteristics that we want to promote, inspire, develop, and refine.

A changing attitude toward humor

Thus far I have made a case for the recovery of the soul, in service to sharpening our understanding of the care of souls. I have offered the metaphor of cultivating as a way to understand what the care of souls actually looks like when it is happening. Now we turn to humor in earnest.

Recent decades have seen an increasingly positive attitude develop toward humor in the theological community. See, for example, Cox (1969), Hyers (1981, 1987), Donnelly (1992), Berger (1997), Capps (2002, 2005, 2006, 2008), and Arbuckle (2008). Arbuckle's book contains an instructive chapter on the church's attitude toward humor through the ages (see Chapter 7, "The Churches and Humor: Reflections"). But overall I know of no particular work that details this movement within the theological community to embrace humor. Indeed, as Peter Berger (1997) has pointed out, "There does not seem to be any overall history of humor in Christian history (p. 203). However, Graham Neville's book, *Free Time: Towards a Theology of Leisure*, does chronicle a shift in attitude toward play. Given the parallels between play and humor Neville's work is instructive for our purposes. (See especially Ch. 7, "Play, Games and Laughter.")²

Neville shows how the current positive attitude toward play developed through the twentieth century, whereas previously, because of an affinity to what Neville (2004) calls "the gospel of work," the Christian tradition had been at best cool to the notion of play (p. 120). "But over the centuries," he notes, "Christian moralists had to accept that the human play instinct would always find some expression" (p. 121). The question Neville pursues with regard to play parallels what I am interested in with regard to humor: What sort of expression of the playful, or humorous, is appropriate and therefore beneficial to the care of souls? His answer, that the ambiguity of play, games, and laughter must be appreciated "if they are to lead to an abundance of life" (p. 120), influences my conclusions regarding the cultivation of a sense of humor as part of the care of souls.

A "sense of humor"

Humor is notoriously difficult to define. Doris Donnelly's (1992) observation, that all attempts to do so should be undertaken carefully "because humor tends to die in the process of dissection" (p. 390), is actually a refinement of E.B White's more cutting (yes, pun intended) remark: "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested, and the frog dies" (Carr and Greeves 2006, p. 78).

Erik Erikson (1980) knew something about the difficulty of precise definitions. When describing the stages of human growth as "a series of alternative basic attitudes," he noted

² Also instructive on this point is Jaco Hamman's (2007).

that “We take recourse to the term ‘*a sense of*’” (p. 58). Consequently, he often referred not to “trust,” “autonomy,” “initiative,” etc. but rather to a “sense of” these things.

Like a “sense of health” or a “sense of not being well,” such “senses” pervade surface and depth, consciousness and the unconscious. They are ways of conscious *experience*, accessible to introspection (where it develops); ways of *behaving*, observable by others; and unconscious *inner states* determinable by test and analysis. (p. 58)

Following Erikson’s lead I also “take recourse to the term ‘*a sense of*,’” as his understanding applies equally well to *a sense of humor*. It is part of how we experience or *take in* life, and we can reflect consciously upon it (where it exists). It is part of how we behave or *share* life with others; and it is part of our inner and unconscious self, able to be probed and analyzed in various ways.

The ambiguous nature of humor

Having a sense of humor is not the same thing as “being funny” (humor creation) or being able to get, or take, a joke (humor appreciation). Neither is it unambiguously positive. It is possible to have a sick, wicked, twisted, or bizarre sense of humor even as it is possible to have a keen, wonderful, or delightful sense of humor. It is important to distinguish between a sense of humor and the experience of humor itself in order to bring the virtuous and redemptive aspects of humor more clearly into focus.

The distinction is not unlike the difference between experiencing the feeling of shame and having a sense of shame. As Carl Schneider and Neil Pembroke have noted, to feel shame is certainly not pleasant and may not be experienced as positive. Yet widening the scope of shame (Lansky and Morrison 1997) or humor to consider what it means to have a sense of, or we might say, a capacity for, these feelings allows us to identify what may be virtuous or redemptive about them. When speaking of a *sense* of humor we are considering it as a virtue (or a vice), something that is a settled disposition or habitual tendency “to act in certain ways according to certain principles” (Schneider 1977, p. 19).

The care of souls involves the cultivation of a sense of humor as a positive disposition, one that has the capacity to enhance rather than fracture community.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman (1985) describes the remedial power of playfulness, which I take to be very close to what we have been examining as a redemptive sense of humor, with the following story—a story that illustrates this point, but also helps us see how fine the line between virtuous and vicious humor can be.

A rabbi came into his Sunday school one morning to find teachers, parents and the religious school principal terribly upset by the fact that a mischievous 11-year-old had transliterated the well-know Anglo-Saxon word for “feces” into its equivalent in Hebrew phonetics. There was to be an important celebration that day, and it was clear that the wrong tone had been set from the beginning. Instead of entering the discussion going on about the psychological and religious import of the child’s action, the rabbi noticed that the child had spelled the word mistakenly, with a long vowel instead of a short one. The rabbi ignored the content of the situation, berated the kid for not paying more attention to phonetic details, and then told him that he could only join the festivities after he had spelled it right 100 times! (p. 209).

At first blush this may strike us as an anti-relational use of humor. The rabbi did, after all, “berate the kid.” But note that his criticism was not directed at the child’s morals in a

shame-inducing way. Rather, by focusing his critique on the child's language skills and giving the child the opportunity to demonstrate competence one hundred-fold, the rabbi actually introduced a deeper sense of relational respect between the two of them.

Again, this story illustrates the knife-edge on which humor sits. If the rabbi allows his clever response to become personal, his relationship with the child is violated. Yet if he dismissively makes fun of the seriousness with which the parents and teachers are infecting the situation, he risks violating those relationships. Let me suggest a parallel with Erik Erikson's stage theory that can serve as a clarifying analogy.

Eutrapelia: In search of “accurate perception”

In her book *Wisdom and the Senses: The Way of Creativity*, Joan Erikson sought to correct what she and her husband perceived as a nearly constant overemphasis on the syntonic elements of the theory. In a chapter entitled “In Defense of the Dystonic” she argues that while the liabilities of the dystonic elements (mistrust, shame, guilt and the like) may be more evident, they provide a necessary balance to the syntonic elements (basic trust, autonomy, initiative, etc.) in order that a favorable ratio between the two can be attained. The real strength one develops in each stage does not involve the supremacy of the syntonic at the expense of the dystonic, but rather the emergence (or might we say cultivation?) of a given virtue: hope, will, purpose, and so on.

In a remarkable way this model parallels an understanding of the Greek virtue *eutrapelia*, one put forth by Hugo Rahner and others, and the paradoxical tension in which it exists between what the Greeks called *bomocholia* and *agroikia*. Some translations and explanations are in order.

Eutrapelia, which means literally “well turning,” describes those who “turn” to things that are playful and humorous not to escape life's difficulties but rather to enter more fully into life's richness. Graham Neville (2004) notes that the term can refer to verbal ability, “something like ‘wit’” (p. 132). Rahner (1972) says, “this refined mentality of *eutrapelia* is therefore a kind of mobility of the soul. ...The object of *eutrapelia* is play for the sake of seriousness” (p. 94–95). To this end the line from Ted Loder's prayer that I noted earlier is worth noting again: “Grant me now an enchantment of heart ...So that I may learn again that life is never quite as serious as I suppose, yet more precious than I dare take for granted, even for a moment.”

Aquinas, acknowledging his debt to Aristotle, accorded *eutrapelia* “the favoured middle position between a kind of gloomy seriousness on the one hand and scurrilous buffoonery on the other” (Neville 2004, p. 133). The buffoon, or *bomocholos*, “was the poor wretch who hung about the altar of sacrifice in the hope of snatching or begging an odd bit of meat ... the one who was ready to make jokes at every turn for the sake of a good meal and himself to be made the butt of cheap gibes” (Rahner 1972, p. 93). The *agroikos* was the opposite extreme: the boorish person who adds no humor and cannot appreciate the humor of others (Rahner 1972, pp. 93–94).

Neville (2004) suggests that the roots of *agroikia* extend to the earliest centuries of the pre-Constantinian church. Sensitive to the ways in which the satirical wit of Greek culture could “overreach itself ...in debunking genuine religion or true morality” (p. 132) and unsure of its place in the empire, the church was not yet secure enough to tolerate a humorous critique of itself. It therefore treated humor with great suspicion, alert to the spirit of *bomocholia* that might attempt cheap jokes at its expense, and leaned heavily toward the dystonic pole of *agroikia*. This helps to explain why the only use of *eutrapelia* in the New

Testament, Eph. 5:4, carries a decidedly negative connotation (“vulgar talk” NRSV, “coarse joking” NIV). These are legitimate renderings, but not the only possible ones.

The spirit of *agroikia*, a kind of the deep dystonic suspicion of play and humor, is epitomized by the character Jorge in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*. An elderly monk in a fourteenth century Italian monastery, Jorge is discovered to have poisoned fellow monks who dared to examine a manuscript from Aristotle that suggested that God laughed. As an *agroikos*, Jorge believes that “laughter is weakness, corruption, the foolishness of our flesh. It is the peasant’s entertainment, the drunkard’s license...” (Eco 1983, p. 576). The church feared, and to some extent still fears, what Joan Erikson identified as the “maladaptive” expression of the syntonic and so erred toward what she labeled the “malignant tendency” of the dystonic. In the Eriksonian scheme of things, for example, this means that to become a person who is totally and utterly trusting, cautioned not at all by a sense of mistrust, would be maladaptive. “Casual, misplaced trust can be so defeating as to lead to a generalized sweeping mistrust. *Accurate perception must be cultivated...*” (J. Erikson 1988, p. 116, italics mine). In the church’s case, it means that an unguarded embrace of humor that does not account for its more malicious, tendentious aspects that emerge in *bomocholia* is “maladaptive.” Only the cultivation of “accurate perception” where humor is concerned, perception that rightly distinguishes redemptive humor from that which merely ridicules, can rescue us from the “malignant tendencies” of *agroikian* excess and enhance the ministry of the care of souls.

C.S. Lewis was wary of a kind of humor that he identified as “flippancy,” which I would argue could be classified as a particular strain of *bomocholian* humor. In *The Screwtape Letters* (Lewis 1961), Wormwood the junior tempter is advised by his Uncle Screwtape that flippancy is an extremely economical form of humor to employ in the corruption of the human soul. “Among flippant people,” advises Screwtape, “the Joke is always assumed to have been made. No one actually makes it, but every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it. ...It [flippancy] is a thousand miles away from joy; it deadens, instead of sharpening, the intellect; and it excites no affection between those who practice it” (p. 52).

Citing the work of Belgian psychologist Vassilis Saroglou, Capps (2006) identifies the “tendentious” aspects of humor as legitimate grounds for religion to be cautious in its embrace of humor. I believe we can understand these aspects of humor, which Capps identifies as aggressive, overtly hostile, or degrading (Capps 2006, p. 431), as a kind of first cousin to the “flippancy” identified by Lewis.

Wanting to avoid the “maladaptive” state of *bomocholia* toward which Wormwood wants to lure his “patient” and the “tendentious” aspects of humor that may go along with it, as well as the “malignant tendencies” of *agroikia* embodied by the monk Jorge, Christian theology has sought to define and defend *eutrapelia* as an appropriate middle ground where humor can flourish. However, securing such a middle ground for *eutrapelia* and the implications it carries for a sense of humor will never be an easy task. Referring particularly to the understanding of *eutrapelia* as “wit” mentioned above, Neville states: “It is easy to see how this meaning teeters on a knife-edge between a kind of happy amusement at the oddities of human existence and a sort of smartness which makes a mockery even of sacred things” (p. 132). As with “play” and “fun,” humor is ambiguous (carrying an uncertain meaning, or capable of being understood in more than one way) and paradoxical (something seemingly contradictory yet possibly true). While not denying the usefulness of Rahner’s work to establish *eutrapelia* as a virtue, Neville points out that Rahner, through his reliance on Aristotle and Aquinas, leans heavily toward the positive implications of the concept as he moves toward reinstating *eutrapelia* “as a Greek virtue baptized in Christ” (p. 132).

Humor cuts both ways

We would do well to take the same cautious approach to one-sided appropriations of humor in the Christian tradition that Neville does to similar interpretations of play. “Perhaps it seems churlish,” he notes, “to respond coolly to the enthusiasm, properly so called, of the advocates of play as a key to the mystical understanding of the world” (p. 130). But the reasons for his caution comes clear as he notes, on the one hand, the near idyllic image of play that Rahner evokes—“To play is to yield oneself to a kind of magic ... to the effortless measures of a heavenly dance” (p. 130)—and then points to this starkly contrasting image of play from Ronald Blythe:

One of the most dreadful sights in the country of the old is that of long rows of [people] playing the Las Vegas fruit machines. Had Dante heard of it he would have cleared a space for it in Hell (p. 131).

It seems to me that many, if not most, of the relatively recent apologetic efforts urging us to take humor seriously make too little an effort to account for the paradoxical nature of humor. Humor may *seem* to be healing and redemptive, when in fact it is not, or as seemingly harmful, when in fact it is not. We cannot always be certain that even our most sincere efforts at wit will not *unwittingly* visit discomfort or even pain on others. What we intend as *eutrapelia* will at times display itself as *bomocholia*, just as our attempts at restraint will at times smack of *agroikia*.

Of late I have been field testing a joke, reactions to which have heightened my appreciation for the fact that humor sits on a knife edge and can as easily cut one way as the other.

A guy goes into a bar; he’s short and slight, and as he walks up to the counter he slips in some dog’s mess on the floor. He picks himself up, orders a drink, and sits down at a table. Shortly afterward a huge guy walks in and slips on the same mess. As he picks himself up, the little guy walks over and says, “I just did that,” so the big guy picks him up and rubs his nose in it. (Tapper and Press 2000, p. 115)

The majority of my colleagues and friends (especially those who are dog owners) find this joke hilarious, as do I. However, a significant minority (including my wife) crack not the slightest smile. When I have inquired about their reactions I have discovered that while they do not see anything particularly funny about the scatological nature of the joke, they are especially put off by the manner in which they understand the “little guy” in the joke as being abused by the “big guy.” If that is what they hear as the salient feature of the joke, then their offense is warranted because they do not receive the humor in the joke as redemptive.

Indeed, the knife-edge on which appropriate humor rests is very similar to the paradoxical balancing point of the chunk of earth and piece of sky that defines the soul. At the heart of the Christian faith is paradox: the Christ is both human and divine, humans are simultaneously saints and sinners, the word of God is both law and gospel. To overemphasize the truth of one facet is to deny the truth of both.

As noted previously, humor can be characterized as both paradoxical and ambiguous. The two are not that far apart, as mathematician William Byers (2007) has noted in referring to them as “cousins” (p. B12). His description of “multiple, possibly inconsistent, points of view” relating to “a single situation or idea that can be seen from two or more conflicting viewpoints” relates equally well to ambiguity and paradox. As a metaphor to aid in the understanding of ambiguity and paradox he suggests “binocular vision.” Each eye,

looking only by itself, sees from a slightly different angle and what it sees is flat and lacking in depth. But working in tandem, two eyes produce binocular vision as “the inconsistent viewpoints registered by each eye combine in the brain to produce a unified view that includes something entirely new: depth perception” (p. B12). Only when we cultivate an accurate perception of humor, seeing clearly its potential for both the hurt and healing that is implicit in all humor, can we truly begin to cultivate a sense of humor that has redemptive possibilities for the soul.

Niebuhr reconsidered

In 1946 Reinhold Niebuhr published an essay entitled “Humor and Faith.” The essay sounded a note of cautious appreciation regarding the theological significance of humor. Niebuhr contended that both religious faith and a sense of humor play important roles in confronting and absorbing life’s incongruities. But in the end he concluded that humor is a prelude to faith, and not a substitute for it. Often quoted is his assertion that

Laughter must be heard in the outer courts of religion; and the echoes of it should resound in the sanctuary; but there is no laughter in the holy of holies. There laughter is swallowed up in prayer and humor is fulfilled by faith. (p. 99)

Niebuhr’s view did not hold sway through the remainder of the last century and on into this one, however. Commenting on the passage just cited, Conrad Hyers (1987) has written:

Niebuhr wrote many wise things, but this was not one of them. His words reflect an old taboo, and one that goes right back to the garden. The fall is, if anything, the loss of laughter, not the loss of seriousness (p. 14).

Donald Capps is similarly skeptical of the wisdom of Niebuhr’s view, though for somewhat different reasons. Capps (2006) argues that the distinction that Niebuhr wants to make between “immediate incongruities” (the province of humor) and “ultimate incongruities” (the province of faith) is a false one (p. 434–35).

I believe, however, that Niebuhr’s argument ought to be reconsidered. It may well be that his words reflect not so much an “old taboo” as a piece of wisdom that the church needs once again to heed as it seeks to get its bearings in this post-Christendom era. Niebuhr’s argument, it must be noted, is not that humor is precluded or rendered unnecessary by faith, but that humor is “fulfilled by faith” (Capps 2006, p. 436). He does not argue that that faith *refuses* humor entry in the holy of holies, but rather that faith “swallows” and “fulfills” humor. Niebuhr’s reasoning, it seems to me, adheres to the “Protestant principle” that no absolute claim should be made for a relative reality (Tillich 1957). Vital as a sense of humor is for the cultivation of the soul, it can at best stand along side of one’s sense of awe and reverence for the ultimate. And even then humor can do so only as it maintains a posture that reflects the laughter of delight and not derision, as *eutrapelia* in the best sense and not *bomocholia* or *agroikia* at their worst. This balanced understanding of humor, and the willingness to acknowledge religious experiences even more profound than humor, are vital components of what I mean by *accurate perception* in the care of souls.

One voice that has affirmed the wisdom Niebuhr’s assessment of humor is that of British pastoral theologian Steven Pattison (1988). He notes that “attempts to integrate laughter into Christianity are refreshing and welcome, but often uncritical and peripheral to the main Christian tradition” (p. 176). For the most part, he points out, those reflecting on humor and

laughter theologically regarded them “as self-explanatory and unequivocally good and desirable” (p. 176) while Niebuhr remains a lone voice pointing to the limitations of humor and laughter. Pattison concludes that it is important to see “the ambivalent and sometimes negative aspects of humor rather than demanding that it should immediately and uncritically be assimilated into Christian religion or pastoral care” (p. 178). I agree.

The wisdom of this more cautionary approach toward humor, one that reaches toward accurate perception, has come home to me in two recent events. The first was an item in my local newspaper. Titled, “Atheists Bond During ‘De-baptism,’” it began: “Belief in God symbolically evaporated when more than a hundred atheists were ‘de-baptized’ with a blow dryer yesterday” (Pulliam 2008, p. B4). I admit to having laughed when I read that the president of American Atheists, who presided at the event, began by asking more than a hundred gathered non-believers: “Do you agree that the magical potency of today’s ceremony is exactly equal to the magical efficacy of ceremonial baptism with di-hydrogen oxide...?” And I laughed louder still when I read that the first person in line to be debaptismally blow dried shouted, “Dry me brother! I’m free!”

The article brilliantly captured a moment of incongruity which was indeed humorous so long as it could be understood to be, in Niebuhr’s terms, in “the outer courts of religion.” But my laughter stopped abruptly when I took in the picture that accompanied the article. There a 9 year-old girl, accompanied by her mother and surrounded by laughing adults, tilted her blow-dried face upwards with a huge smile. She had been invited by the organization’s president to agree that “the power of all magical ceremonies is nonexistent.” While I, as a theologically trained adult, am sensitive to the difference between what is magical and what is ritual or sacramental, it demands too much of a 9 year-old, who may well be put to bed at night with a chapter of *Harry Potter*, to make the same distinction. And while I appreciate the humor in Jesus’ use of hyperbole—camels squeezing through a needle’s eye, lighted lamps being put under a bed—the thought of millstones being hung around the necks of these adults (see Matthew 18.6) elicited no mirth. This event was something occurring in what Niebuhr referred to as “the holy of holies.” And I recalled Erik Erikson’s (1963) observation that “the clinician can only observe that many are proud to be without religion whose children cannot afford their being without it” (p. 251). I realized later that if we Christians in Columbus, Ohio were getting a good laugh out of this article as we got ourselves ready for church that Sunday morning, it was because our laughter had not yet been “swallowed up in prayer” nor our “humor fulfilled by faith.”

The second event that raised my appreciation for Niebuhr’s cautionary approach to humor was the release of Bill Maher’s film, *Religulous* (a combination of the words “religion” and “ridiculous”). Billed as a documentary/unscripted comedy, the film puts religion under the microscope of postmodern scrutiny using unscripted interviews of largely unsuspecting people who possess clear religious convictions. Of the film Maher has said, “We’re winking and having a good time, and we’re not trying to be judgmental” (Larry King Live, 8/28/08). But it is clear that that Maher is not kidding when he says of religion: “I do have a serious intellectual problem with it.” It is also clear that what most disturbs Maher about religion is that it dares to suggest that death does not get the last word. He rightly, and hilariously, lampoons those who speak with excessive certainty about their knowledge of heaven. It is hyperbolic to be sure, but no less comedic, when Maher characterizes those who respond to his question about what happens when you get to heaven with an answer something like this: “You’ll meet Jesus. He’s wearing a white robe. There’s a little gold piping on the sleeve. And then you go into this room and eat eggs and you watch ‘F Troop’” (Larry King Live, 8/28/08). This is funny, but at a deeper level it is profoundly sad and troubling. Bill Maher, it seems to me, incarnates Screwtape’s

observation that “among flippant people, the Joke is always assumed to have been made. No one actually makes it, but every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it” (Lewis 1961, p. 52). To my mind, Niebuhr’s characterization of the humor represented in Maher’s characterization of heaven must be considered: “We laugh cheerfully at the incongruities on the surface of life; but if we have no other resource but humor to deal with those which reach below the surface, our laughter becomes an expression of our sense of meaninglessness” (Niebuhr 1946, p. 51).

Earlier I noted that the line between what Neville refers to as “a kind of happy amusement at the oddities of human existence and a sort of smartness which makes a mockery even of sacred things” (p. 132) is a fine line indeed. No less fine is the line that I have been attempting to navigate between thoughtful critique and what some may regard as a seriously deficient sense of humor on my part in criticizing the “De-baptizers” and their blow driers and Bill Maher and his documentary. What then is at stake? Why risk quibbling when chortling would clearly be the more pleasurable response?

Humor as an act of faith in the post-Constantinian church

The answers to these questions reside finally in the cultivation of “accurate assessment” regarding the church’s place in the culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I have noted Neville’s observation that the pre-Constantinian church, sensitive to the ways in which the satirical wit of Greek culture could “overreach itself ...in debunking genuine religion or true morality” (p. 132) and unsure of its place in the empire, was not yet secure enough to tolerate a humorous critique of itself. However, Neville goes on to point out that the evolution of the church in the Constantinian era “from an endangered minority sect to an authoritarian power in society enabled it to tolerate amusements which it had once been inclined to condemn ...” (p. 133). My argument, that it is now time to reconsider the level of amusement we are willing to tolerate, is based on the premise that, slow though we may be to recognize it, we now live as people of faith in a post-Constantinian, post-Christendom era. I am contending, with Neil Postman, that we *are* in danger of “amusing ourselves to death.” What is at stake *is* our souls. Once overfed by an *agroikian* spirit of dour hyper-seriousness, the soul is now in danger of gorging itself on *bomocholian* flippancy. Wouldn’t it be fun to arrange an evening conversation over ale with C.S. Lewis and Bill Maher?

In the end I contend that believing in an *eutrapelian* sense of humor as redemptive and life-affirming *is* an act of faith.³ It is a belief that foolishness, even absurdity, points to something other than meaninglessness. It is to believe, with G.K. Chesterton, that “nonsense is the nurture of wonder” (Neville 2004, p. 135) and that when humor nudges us to contemplate other possible worlds—“the world of the clown in which disaster is never final, or the world of comedy in which men and women live happily ever after” (Neville 2004, p. 136)—it is not presenting a cruel delusion but rather a foretaste of an eternal reality. Faith in this eternal reality is, in the end, the most accurate perception we can cultivate when involved in the care of souls.

³ My thinking on this point has been shaped by Neville’s argument. See pp. 135–136. And it is in keeping with Niebuhr’s assertion that ultimately “humor is fulfilled by faith.”

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