

The consolations of humour

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Abstract

This examination of the corpus of anecdotes about the Mormon missionary J. Gordon Kimball (1953-1938), is used to point out, first, that there seem to be no substantive grounds for imputing aggressive motives to their tellers or their audiences. In fact, the central character of this corpus of anecdotes was a much beloved figure in his lifetime, and the character is still regarded with affection by many who only know him through the anecdotes. The second point is that these jokes might offer compensations, but compensations unrelated to the release of and relief from libidinal forces. They rather can be understood in a way so that they may offer compensations of a different kind—the consolations of a philosophy.

Keywords: jokes, aggression, appropriate incongruity, Mormon, folklore.

The view that these jokes reveal the hostility or aggressive intent of joke-tellers...is essentially trivial.

(Christie Davies, *Ethnic Joking around the World*)

Christie Davies and I were long united in regarding aggression as an explanation for jokes as seriously misguided. Whenever and wherever it has been proposed, there existed alternate hypotheses that could explain—indeed, better explain—the data and address its characteristics (Oring 1973, 1975, 1984, 1981, 1987, 1992; Davies 1990, 2002, 2011). The presumption of aggression as the motive for jokes derives primarily from the work of Sigmund Freud, although what Freud had to say about jokes has routinely been misconstrued. All in all, Freud did not maintain that jokes were like dreams that are produced by sexual and aggressive impulses welling up from the unconscious. Even when an aggressive motive might be identified in a joke, that aggression was likely to be entirely conscious (Oring 2016: 3–15). Finally, as noted over forty years ago, “Aggressive impulses, may, on occasion, utilize forms of intellectual play (i.e., jokes) as weapons, but impulses of play, mediated by the intellect, can similarly manipulate aggression in the construction of jokes” (Oring 1975:159). In other words, one may on occasion use a joke as a means of assault, but one might as easily manipulate forms of assault to craft jokes (Oring 1984).

Linked to the hypothesis of aggression is the idea that jokes serve the purposes of release and relief. Jokes are compensatory and serve to re-establish equilibrium in the psyches of joke tellers and their audiences (e.g., Keith-Spiegel 1972: 20–21; Goldstein, Suls, and

Anthony 1972: 160; Rothbart 1977: 90; Dundes 1987: 44; Morreall 2008: 222–224; Kuipers 2008: 362). They serve as a “safety valve” that allow for the “letting off steam” so that the system does not self-destruct. The presumption is that without the means to express pent-up sexual and aggressive impulses that jokes provide, the integrity of the psychophysiological system is ever in jeopardy.¹

In the examination of the corpus of jokes—*anecdotes* actually—that follows, two points should emerge. The first point is that there seem to be no substantive grounds for imputing aggressive motives to their tellers or their audiences. In fact, the central character of this corpus of anecdotes was a much beloved figure in his lifetime, and the character is still regarded with affection by many who only know him through the anecdotes. Of course, one might always argue that aggression is unconscious and that the jokes are a reaction formation to some underlying hostile impulse. Anything, of course, is possible, but one should ask for solid evidence—*ethnographic* evidence, that is—and not just the assertion of the psychoanalytic principle that underneath every expression of love is a deep reservoir of hate. The second point is that these jokes might offer compensations, but compensations unrelated to the release of and relief from libidinal forces. They rather can be understood in a way so that they may offer compensations of a different kind—the consolations of a philosophy.

The body of jokes considered here concern the figure of J. Golden Kimball, a Mormon who became a General Authority in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Born in 1853, he became a muleskinner at the age of fifteen following the death of his father, and he adopted the rough manners and lifestyle of his occupation. His life changed in the early 1880s when he became seriously interested in his Mormon faith. He was sent to be a missionary in the southern United States, an area in which missionaries were deeply resented and where missionary work could be life-threatening. His missionary work, however, was so successful that he was appointed president of the Southern States Mission and later was called to serve as one of the Seven Presidents of the First Council of the Seventy. Between missions, he returned to ranching, married, and fathered six children. As a General Authority, he was often called upon to travel to various church wards throughout the West to solve problems and address congregations. It was through these visits and his public speaking that he became widely known for his dedication to the church, his honesty, and his humour (Eliason 2007: 1–7). The J. Golden Kimball anecdotes revolve around these traits and the incompatibility of the habits of his muleskinner way of life—swearing, coffee-drinking, a lack of deference to authority—and his official church position.

William A. Wilson, a dean of Mormon folklore scholarship, actually argued that neither J. Golden Kimball nor any high church authority was the central figure of Mormon humour. It was rather the “beleaguered bishop...the Relief Society president, and occasionally a high councillor or the stake president” (2006 [1985]: 224). Wilson also claimed that there was no single meaning for the Mormon jokes that he recounted. A number of different—even contradictory—meanings were possible, which depended largely on the tellers and listeners and the particular circumstances in which the jokes were told—what folklorists call the “social context” of the humour (2006: 234–325).

Undoubtedly, there is truth in this view, and yet it imposes a definite limitation on the interpretation of humour or the interpretation of any kind of folklore. The limitation lies in the fact that folklorists would have nothing to say about the corpus of J. Golden Kimball stories or any other body of Mormon lore. They could only speak about individual expressions that erupt in an array of particular circumstances. Folklore studies would then become an interminable journey from social interaction to social interaction without ever being able to make any credible generalizations. This problem is not one that arises from Wilson’s perspective alone. Others have made similar arguments (e.g., Ellis 2003: 89), and it is, to some extent, a consequence of the performance approach to folklore that first

crystallized in the early 1970's and which has had a following in folklore studies ever since. A performance is a unique event with a particular set of personnel, a specific physical location, and a particular interactional dynamic (Bauman 1977). It is not really comparable to any other event except in the broadest sense that events have actors, settings, and social structures and proceed from within a basic set of broadly recognized symbolic forms.

Wilson does modify his perspective somewhat when he suggests that jokes remain “as clear markers of central issues in the society, as a barometer of those concerns engaging the minds of the people at any particular moment” (2006: 235). And this also has a measure of truth. But what exactly is a central marker? Do we find out what concerns people by scrutinizing the topics of the jokes they tell? If so, why not simply listen to their conversations; study their letters to editors in newspapers; or sample their emails, internet forums, tweets, and Facebook pages? Surely these would give a better picture of their concerns than their jokes; unless, there is something to be found in jokes that would not necessarily emerge in these other kinds of communications.

If jokes and other forms of folklore are important, it could only be because there is something in them that is unconscious such that their disseminators are to some degree unaware of the implications of what they are saying and doing. This does not mean unconscious in the psychoanalytic sense of the term: primitive sexual and aggressive impulses repressed in some particular portion of the human psyche which disguise themselves in various symbolic formations and which can only be discerned through close psychological analysis. There are many aspects of thought and behaviour which are unconscious simply because people cannot entirely know their sources or histories and cannot be fully cognizant of their organization, associations, presuppositions, or implicatures.

Consequently, we often do not precisely know what we are doing or exactly how we are doing it (Spiro 1974: xiii). A few quick examples should suffice as illustrations. Most obvious is the example of language. We speak with only the most rudimentary sense of how to form a grammatical utterance. We engage in various grammatical transformations unaware that we are doing so. If we were called upon to give an account of the rules governing our utterances, we would likely fail. The four Maxims identified by H. Paul Grice that govern cooperative conversation—Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner—are largely unconscious in the same sense. Recently, I tried to explain to a foreign colleague the use of the definite and indefinite article in English and found that I could not do it. All I could do was point out where in her essay the usage was awkward or was wrong.

Also consider what I would call a rule of eating behaviour in the United States. Food that is picked up with a utensil must be placed in the mouth and not returned to the plate or bowl in the absence of some kind of excuse. The presumption is that food being picked up with a utensil should be of the right size to be placed in the mouth and consumed. Food that can be returned to the plate is food that can be picked up with the hands. While there may be regional differences concerning which foods fall in the categories of what might be called “utensil food” and “hand food,” the rule seems to be a broad one. And although most would recognize this rule to be generally true now that it has been stated, no one ever explicitly formulated or formally taught this rule even though it is followed rather conscientiously.

Much of what we do as social beings in social settings and social interactions is unconscious in this sense. We act according to rules of which we are largely unaware and register things automatically without subjecting them to a deliberate scrutiny. The same is particularly true in processing a joke and other forms of folklore. We unreflectively survey an extensive encyclopaedia of acquired knowledge and select those bits from that archive relevant to the situation at hand. Sometimes we are aware of what we are doing and how we do it; most often we are not.

I regard jokes, and humour more generally, as dependent upon the perception of an appropriate incongruity. To get a joke and be amused by it, one must perceive a structure of ideas such that two conceptual domains that are regarded as incongruous are simultaneously recognized as appropriately related. Furthermore, that appropriate relationship is recognized as spurious, specious, or illegitimate by standards of logic, practicality, or traditional behaviour. A children's riddle can serve as a simple illustration:

When is a door not a door?
When it's ajar.

The riddle question presents an incongruity—indeed, a logical contradiction. Something is a door and not a door; that is, it is both A and not A. The riddle answer makes the incongruity appropriate by suggesting the door is ajar; that is, ajar, partially opened, which a door can certainly be. But it also suggests that the door is not a door but a storage container, a jar. To grasp the humour of this riddle one must recognize the incongruity, the appropriateness established by the word ajar, and the spuriousness of this appropriateness since it depends upon a pun which is recognized as illegitimate since a word or phrase must have a constant meaning in a communicative situation. If words can change their meaning in the course of an argument, there is no hope for ever reaching a valid conclusion. Puns cannot be permitted (except, perhaps, in French literary theory). Were puns allowed, then the syllogism

All men are mortal;
All philosophers are men;
Socrates is a philosopher whose ideas endure;
Socrates is immortal.

might be permitted if “immortal” is allowed to mean that Socrates's ideas and reputation live on long after the death of his body. “Immortal” is being used in both a literal and figurative sense. It is not the man Socrates who physically endures but his ideas, his philosophy, his reputation, and his influence. Actually, this elision in the move between the literal and figurative (the physical and ideational) sense of “immortal” was the basis of Woody Allen's quip: “I hope to achieve immortality by not dying.” This, of course, is a joke in that the initial sense of the word “immortality” is taken figuratively only to be replaced—spuriously—by its literal, corporeal meaning.

The deciphering of a joke is an intellectual process. A joke is “complexly cognitive” (Davies 1991: 59). I do not hold with those who believe that humour is at root an emotional process, although humour is able to arouse emotion—usually because of its contents.² It is true that an individual's emotional relation to the contents of a joke may inhibit or enhance the perception and appreciation of its humour, but a joke needs to be intellectually comprehended as a structure of appropriate incongruity to be understood. The amusement engendered by a joke may itself be an emotional response to it, but that emotion is the result of a cognitive process, not an emotional one (Oring 2016: 57–80).

As for the joke about the door that is not a door or the quip by Woody Allen, it is important to note that we recognize the appropriate incongruity and the spuriousness intuitively, automatically, without reflection or deliberation. If we must stop to deliberate and reflect, we might see why the expression in question is a joke, but we are unlikely to appreciate it as a joke. If we must puzzle over it, if we must analyse it, if we must try to explain it, the joke will lose its value as a source of amusement.

Consider a more complicated example:

What were the last words spoken at the Last Supper?

Everyone who wants to be in the picture, get on this side of the table.

(Keillor 2005: 109).

This is an interesting specimen for a number of reasons. Whatever one's religious affiliation or level of religious knowledge, one should recognize that "Everyone who wants to be in the picture, get on this side of the table" were not words spoken either early or late at the Last Supper. The answer is both logically and scripturally incongruous. "From now on I tell you, I shall not drink wine until the day I drink the new wine with you in the kingdom of my Father" (Matt. 26:29) might prove a more accurate answer to the question. But that would hardly be funny. In humour, you do not get points for getting things right.

So the incongruity is clear—we might say even jarring. Matters of posing for pictures were an unlikely subject of discussion at the Last Supper. The appropriateness of the incongruity lies in the reflexive accession of the image of Leonardo da Vinci's depiction of the Last Supper painted on the wall of the convent of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan. Although few have seen the original, which has almost completely deteriorated, the image has proliferated in painted copies and has been reproduced in magazines, books, films, and on the Internet. It is the "go to" image of the Last Supper in Western society. But da Vinci's painting depicts Jesus and the disciples sitting only on one side of a table. When one comes to think about it, it is a strange arrangement of people around a table for a meal, a meal that is usually characterized as part of a Passover Seder. The figures are sitting as though at a dais set before a room full of people. What are Jesus and his disciples doing sitting in such an arrangement; an arrangement in which it would be difficult to talk, to hear, to interact, to or even see one another let alone conduct a complex and lengthy religious ritual? This is the idea to which the joke calls attention; an idea which, for the most part, we have reflexively registered but never consciously considered. The joke claims that the peculiar arrangement of personnel is for the benefit of making a picture—perhaps Leonardo's painting—but it would seem more an allusion to the kind of photography that regularly takes place at social gatherings. So the appropriateness of the incongruity lies in recognizing an anomaly in Leonardo's depiction and recognizing that the idea of posing for a picture might appropriately account for the strange arrangement of personnel, while simultaneously recognizing this justification to be totally spurious.

It is sobering to think that had Leonardo not painted *The Last Supper*, and had we to rely only on the images of Duccio di Buoninsegna (1308-11), Hans Holbein the Younger (1524-25), Juan de Juanes (1562), Tintoretto (1594), Peter Paul Rubens (1632), or Fritz von Uhde (1886), there would have been no joke. These painters placed disciples at the Last Supper on both sides of the table. We should be thankful to Leonardo, for without his painting, we would have been deprived of an otherwise decent joke. (This last comment is itself meant to be humorous, and the reader is given the assignment of explaining why using the concepts and categories outlined above.)

This last joke example shows how much of what we see, say, and do is unreflective and might properly be called unconscious. We do not consciously think our way through a joke, we do not entirely consciously work out the appropriate incongruity (which is why it often proves difficult for people to explain what exactly amused them about a joke), and we do not consciously register the anomalies of things we have repeatedly observed—such as the odd arrangement of personnel in a painting—until a joke, or something else, calls our attention to them. I would also add that often we do not consciously register why we find particular jokes or kinds of jokes striking, agreeable, or seemingly meaningful.

This is the sense in which I propose that the study of jokes and other forms of folklore might provide insights into what people might be perceiving, thinking, and feeling—insights different from those that might be obtained from listening in on their conversations or reading

their email correspondence; insights that come because aspects of folklore expressions are unconscious and because the effects of and the responses to these expressions—aside from amusement and laughter—may be unconscious as well.

Wilson did not believe that J. Golden Kimball stories were “the heart and centre of Mormon humour,” and he suggested these stories showed every indication of having moved from oral folk culture into Mormon popular culture (Wilson 2006: 224). What Wilson was probably referring to was the reprising of J. Golden anecdotes in books, in live one-man shows, and even on phonograph recordings and DVDs.³ Wilson first published these views in 1985. In 1999, however, Eric Eliason showed that J. Golden stories were actually fairly easy to collect, and in a short period of time, his students collected 94 J. Golden Kimball stories comprising 41 different story types (Eliason 2007:44). Even if Wilson were correct, and J. Golden stories in the 1980s were on the wane as oral forms of communication, they would still constitute a set of facts that needed to be examined, analysed, and explained. Eliason has amassed and published what seems, for the time being at least, the definitive collection of these stories which he has supplemented with explanatory notes and commentaries (2007). It is only with such collections as this that scholars from outside a culture, such as myself, are able to access, understand, and comment on these materials and incorporate them into more general discussions of the structures, meanings, and functions of humour.

One of the great oppositions upon which a great number of J. Golden Kimball jokes turn is that between the ideal and the real. One encounters the ideal—that is, the correct, proper, respected, decorous, elevated—which is suddenly transformed in a joke into something ordinary, mean, contemptible, unseemly, or low (see Raskin 1985: 127). This is particularly true in what is often termed “religious humour”. Instances demonstrating this opposition at work are almost too numerous to recount:

One time he [J. Golden Kimball] went out to feed the calf on Sunday morning. He was all dressed in his satins and Sunday best. The darned calf wouldn't drink. In order to get the calf to drink he had to stick his fingers in the milk and put them in the calf's mouth, then stick the calf's nose in the milk. He did that and the calf snorted or sneezed and sprayed milk and mucus all over Brother Kimball. He said, “If I weren't a Mormon, if I wasn't trying not to swear, and I wasn't a priesthood holder, I'd push your _____damned head in the bottom of the bucket”.

(Eliason 2007: 86)

J. Golden swears in the course of emphasizing his status as a Mormon, a priesthood holder, and someone who has abjured swearing. The incongruity is appropriate because J. Golden is not only a habitual swearer, but someone who swears so automatically that he often seems unaware that he is doing so. The playing out of a joke based on the opposition between the ideal and real is not necessarily unidirectional. The path is not always from high to low (although I would venture to guess that the preponderance of religious jokes based on this opposition do follow this path). The movement can sometime be from low to high.

Supposedly, J. Golden Kimball stood in General Conference and said, “I would never have the courage to stand before this great congregation in this historic building without being under the influence...of the Holy Ghost of course”.

(Eliason 2007: 67)

Given J. Golden Kimball's tendency to stray from the Word of Wisdom, (and a suggestion that on occasions he did imbibe [Stegner 2013: 400]), and the conventional meaning of the phrase “under the influence”, one might expect that J. Golden's courage in General Conference stems from his having had a good stiff drink. But in fact, the joke begins with an expectation of a disdained and censured influence to ultimately settle upon a lofty and revered one.

If one peruses the corpus of J. Golden Kimball anecdotes, they repeatedly turn on his personal behaviours and traits of character. J. Golden is honest, direct, hard-working, chastising but compassionate, impatient, practical, humble, wise, and funny. By this last characteristic, I do not merely mean that the anecdotes about him are funny, but that a good number of anecdotes depict him as being deliberately funny in his asides and retorts. Furthermore, he is totally committed to the doctrines and institutions of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints even if he seems incapable of curbing his swearing, his coffee drinking, and his speaking what he sees to be the truth to both ordinary church members as well as to higher church authorities. Yet he is also aware of and owns up to his failings, even if in the very course of repenting he transgresses yet again. For he is not merely repentant, but, as he says, “damned repentant.” His cursing seems to be the highlighted element of his behaviour even for those not familiar with any substantial portion of the joke corpus. As Eliason points out, those who had heard J. Golden Kimball’s name, but were unfamiliar with the story tradition, would ask, “Wasn’t he the cussing apostle?” (Eliason 2007: 16). A “damn” or a “hell” could be inserted into stories even when the expressions seem gratuitous and not essential to the creation of the anecdote’s humour (Eliason 2007: 9). Eliason reckons that some swear word—usually “hell” or “damn”—shows up in 71 percent of the corpus of J. Golden anecdotes so that swearing constitutes an important speech register of these stories (45). (Stories that Eliason includes in a chapter of his book that he sees as most closely resembling J. Golden anecdotes [115–122] do not employ any swear words, except in one instance where there is a specific reference to J. Golden Kimball in the text [viz. 120]).⁴ Perhaps the prominence of swearing in the repertoire owes something to the fact that it is a public transgression—and J. Golden is depicted as swearing on the radio or at conference—whereas something like coffee drinking, which is less prominent in the corpus, is a behaviour more likely to be done in private or with a small group of friends.

It could be argued, however, that J. Golden’s swearing is simply another facet of his honesty. Swearing is meant to convey and arouse emotion. That is why swearing invariably draws on the vocabularies of sex, scatology, and religion for its figures of speech. Such words come pre-charged with emotion. To swear then is to convey the emotional content of a message; to mark for oneself and for others that what is being said is not merely cerebral but passionate. When one feels emotion, but does not express it, one is, to some extent, being dishonest. One is suppressing an essential aspect of a message. Since Mormons are socialized to be polite, helpful, and dutiful, they are asked to suppress this emotional dimension in their expressions, but in the act of doing so, they also suppress an authentic aspect of their selves. The J. Golden Kimball of story does not allow his honest feelings to be overruled by social convention or religious injunction. When he has some truth to speak, whether about a practical project, a backsliding congregation, or the dullness of a sermon delivered by a church authority, he speaks directly and to the point. His swearing is meant to convey the emotional dimension of his message. So J. Golden’s swearing is not merely a survival of his mule-skinning days, nor can it be dismissed as just a moral failing. It is an expression of sincerity and part-and-parcel of his honest persona. In this respect, the stories provide an arena for the display of a basic conflict in Mormon values, that between politeness and emotion; or perhaps more generally, between piety and truthfulness.

So why did, and do, Mormons tell stories about J. Golden Kimball? This question marks the move from analysis to interpretation. Perhaps the most common hypothesis is that the stories serve as a safety valve for letting off steam in a programmed and closely monitored social and religious environment (Wilson 1977: 54–55; Eliason and Mould 2013: 355, 359; Brunvand 2013: 363; Siporin 2013: 395). Wilson felt that Mormon missionary jokes contribute to survival: “A missionary who can laugh...is likely to be more effective...[and] is likely to better survive the battle” (2006: 211). The idea that humour relieves tensions is

usually attributed to Sigmund Freud (Eliason 2007: 35), although, as noted above, this is not what Freud actually claimed (Oring 2016: 3–15). Certainly, this is a possibility, although the experimental confirmation of the tension-relief thesis is equivocal (Martin 2006: 269–307). A number of hypotheses advanced to explain political jokes told behind the Iron Curtain were all found to be wanting. The idea that the jokes relieved tensions was one of those hypotheses, but it seemed that people “survived” whether they told jokes or not. In fact, it could be argued that there was probably a slightly smaller chance of survival for those who told jokes since a joke teller could lose a job, be sent to the gulag, or, at one time, be shot for engaging in what was regarded as “anti-Soviet conversation” (Oring 2016: 109–128).

I have always thought of jokes more as a philosophy than therapy—as commentary rather than catharsis (e.g., Oring 1992: 16–80; 2003: 58–70). In the case of the J. Golden Kimball materials, we have a cycle of jokes about a General Authority whose commitment to the church is rock solid. J. Golden is a man who has dedicated himself to fulfilling all the tasks that have been set for him by the church. He is hardworking and determined to get results. He would give his life for the church. He is so honest that he would not even tolerate “nice falsehoods” to be said about him at his funeral (Eliason 2007: 76). His sense of justice can even be favourably compared with that of God’s.

J. Golden Kimball was sent out to call a missionary from an outlying stake [parish] in the valley. He told the stake president to find a list of eligible men, then he and the stake president sat down and eliminated all but one. This one was a poor farmer saving up to buy a wagon. J. Golden says to call on him anyway. When they told him what they wanted, the man says, “I want to buy my wagon, I don’t want to go on a mission.” J. Golden tells him, “If you go, you’ll be able to buy a better one when you get back.” So the man accepted the call and went but had to sell his horses and use his savings in order to go. The man goes and comes back, and goes to work to buy back his horses. Then he goes to see J. Golden Kimball and tells him, “It’s been a year and I still can’t buy my horses, let alone the wagon.” J. Golden takes him out to the stable and picks out his best horses and wagon and give them to the man. The guy doesn’t want to accept them and has to be persuaded to take them. He finally takes them and leaves. Elder Kimball goes inside, and his wife is waiting for him to scold him for being so dumb as to give away their best horses. She really lays into him, and J. Golden tells her, “Be quiet woman, if the Lord won’t keep his promises, by hell, I will”.

(Eliason 2007: 98)

Of course, J. Golden was in no position to make promises on God’s behalf. Nevertheless, J. Golden seems irritated when God fails to reward his righteous own. A promise was made to the farmer, and even though the farmer does not regard it as J. Golden’s obligation to fulfil, J. Golden fulfils it nevertheless. He is that honest. (Although he may have overlooked the possibility that he was being used as an instrument of divine justice.) Incidentally, this is one of those texts where the use of “hell” is somewhat gratuitous. The joke would work well even if the word were omitted.

Despite J. Golden’s many virtues, he has failings. In one anecdote, J. Golden is even portrayed as harbouring doubts.

In his last years, he [J. Golden] met a friend in the street who said to him, how are you Golden? How are you getting along?” “Well, to tell you the truth, I’m not doing so good. Getting old and tired. You know Seth, I’ve been preaching this gospel nigh into sixty years now, and I think it’s time for me to get over to the other side to find out how much of what I’ve been saying is true”.

(Eliason 2007: 70)

This last would seem to be a migratory anecdote as a similar text can be found in a collection of Jewish jokes (Mendelsohn 1941: 68). In any event, in this text there is the suggestion that

even a General Authority, someone who has risked his life for the church and has devoted his days to furthering its mission, could still entertain uncertainties as to the reality of it all.

It would be hard to believe that someone who would recount J. Golden anecdotes would consider that they depict the life of a sinner who had no place in the world to come. As one anecdote about J. Golden states, “He had as big a funeral as there was for President [Brigham] Young” (Eliason 2007: 113). So what in these anecdotes do people find so attractive? Certainly, many of them are funny, but there are a myriad of jokes that are probably funnier than the ones told about J. Golden Kimball.

These anecdotes paint the picture of someone who is faithful but not rigidly or mindlessly faithful. He strays—perhaps not in fundamentals—but he strays nevertheless. He even has doubts and seems to question God’s justice. He resorts to swearing, can never seem to fully control his addiction to coffee, and has never acquired the talent for tact over abrupt and pointed criticism. The stories are about someone who is fundamentally faithful and good, but not too faithful or too good.

Uncle Golden used to say, “I have heard so much about goodness that sometimes I get unhappy, even at conference, and I feel like a little girl I heard of who did wrong. Her mother importuned her and laboured with her so much that she said, “Mother, don’t try and make me good; just shoot me”.

(Eliason 2007: 109)

In these respects, J. Golden is like most people. Religious institutions—regardless of denomination—invariably make enormous demands on their followers. They are asked to censor what they say, control what they do, and inhibit what they desire. Poverty, sickness, and death are represented as being part of a plan that is ultimately for their benefit. In other words, religions set a godly metric for human behaviour. And since humans are not gods, they are bound, at least to some degree, to fail in living according to it. J. Golden likewise fails, but there is little doubt as to his genuine and significant merits. J. Golden Kimball is something more than a saint in the colloquial sense of that word in Mormon culture, and his failings serve only to highlight those merits. Because J. Golden of the anecdotes is a human being in every sense of the term, he can serve as an exemplar to all those who must work out their salvation on earth as human beings. I think it is in this sense that the J. Golden Kimball jokes might constitute a philosophy; a philosophy that injects a note of realism into the struggle for salvation and describes a terrain of action for those who strive but who cannot entirely succeed. It shows them the possibility of salvation despite numerous and inevitable lapses. Perhaps that may be why J. Golden Kimball is often promoted in the traditional anecdotes from a President of the Seventy to the rank of Apostle (Eliason 2007: 46). The higher his status within the church, the more certainly his salvation can be assumed even if he thoughtlessly—and sometimes deliberately—acts and strays pretty much like everyone else.

Anthropologist Melford Spiro did field work in a number of societies in different parts of the world: Micronesia, Israel, and Burma, now Myanmar. At this last research site, Spiro devoted considerable effort to studying the beliefs and behaviours that focused on nats; spirits the Burmese propitiated in order to gain health, wealth, and prestige, or to avoid danger (Spiro 1974: 4, 266). The nats, however, were only approached to achieve goals in this world. They were never approached to achieve results in the otherworld. The otherworld was strictly the province of Buddhism and charity, morality, and meditation were the sole means to be reborn into a higher life and eventually to achieve nirvana—the extinction of existence when all suffering comes to an end (269). To a great extent, the two modalities—the nat cults and Theravada Buddhism—are incommensurate, but Spiro argues that they are symbiotic in the sense that it is only because the nat cults deal with the exigencies of this world that Buddhism can maintain its rarefied and uncompromising regime about achieving the next. Without the

nat cults, Buddhism would have to compromise its doctrines, because people live in and have to deal with this world even if all they are supposed to be doing is preparing for a world to come (279–280).

Perhaps J. Golden Kimball stories do something similar. After all, Latter-Day Saints are human beings living in this world even if they are in a constant state of preparation for the next. The stories express a necessarily human scale of operation even for actors who hold they are actually participating in a vast cosmic drama. The two scales are necessarily incommensurable. But the jokes are able to highlight something of this incongruity of the human and godly and find some measure of appropriateness in it, even if that appropriateness ultimately proves specious. J. Golden Kimball stories—perhaps religious humour more generally—point to the necessarily human dimensions of activity even when it is ostensibly directed toward the sacred and eternal.

Notes

¹ This notion persists even though the hydraulic metaphor on which it is based has long been rejected in the psychological sciences.

² Also, because it involves an “understanding test” which may also provoke an emotional reaction (Sacks 1974: 350).

³ For example Lee (1964); Kimball (1999); (2002).

⁴ The language may be more salty in oral versions than in published ones (Eliason 2007: 48).

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