

Book review

Schweizer, Bernard (2019) *Christianity and the Triumph of Humor: From Dante to David Javerbaum*, New York: Routledge.

There is a version of confirmation bias endemic to philosophy. Philosophy is a prepositional discipline, it needs an “of”. But to do quality philosophy of physics, philosophy of art, or philosophy of mind, you have to have mastery, not only of philosophy, but also of physics, art, or neuroscience. Acquiring the secondary expertise requires significant time and effort, which in turn generally necessitates an intrinsic interest in the field. As such, philosophers of x will tend to have a personal commitment to the value and virtue of x from their dedication to their studies, or, if they have not put in the work, they betray a lack of authority in x when analysing it. This colours philosophical discourse, making contributions generally either less critical or less well-informed, despite the fact that well-informed critique is the coin of philosophy.

Bernard Schweizer’s book *Christianity and the Triumph of Humour* is among the gems that avoid this concern. It is a well-informed and critical discussion that inserts itself in the contemporary discourses of both philosophy of humour, making contributions to the specific subject and to the field in general, and Christian theology, holding up the philosophically interesting questions in all their glorious complexity.

The term *triumph* in the title indicates that one should expect the book to referee a conflict between Christianity and humour. There is a limited truth to that. Christianity arises in part as a reaction to the hedonistic excesses of the Roman elite. As a result, it has long harboured theological approaches with an anti-sensualist ethic. Goodness is found in faith, in the afterlife, in the soul properly aligned, in asceticism, in emulating the suffering of Jesus. Laughter, joy, and merriment are shallow pleasures of the flesh, of sin, and therefore to be avoided. There is no depiction in the Gospels of Jesus laughing, so the question “What would Jesus do?” must therefore be asked literally in all seriousness. Humour is thereby dismissed as problematic.

But it would be a gross oversimplification to paint Christianity writ large with this brush. Sure, there have been those who sought to eliminate all bodily pleasures among the movers and Shakers in the history of Christian thought, but, there are also those who make a place for humour in the well-lived Christian life. Aquinas (2012 [1274]), as well as the Enlightenment writer Shaftesbury (who is curiously absent from Schweizer’s discussion), contended that an all-loving God would not have created beings in his image who would not experience awe, wonder, and joy in Creation. While there are morally problematic instances of humour, the line goes, this ought not taint the phenomenon as a whole.

Contemporary thinkers under the mantle of the “theology of laughter” have taken up this bifurcated Christian approach to humour – there is good humour and bad humour and we should be able to develop a Christian basis for the criterion that distinguishes them. While good humour is generally correlated in the material realm with ice cream sandwiches, the development of an

abstract criterion of demarcation turns on a comic version of the Golden Rule. We ought to only engage in nice humour, playful humour, humour that would not hurt us if it had been directed at us.

Schweizer clearly and rigorously analyses the postulates of the theology of laughter, finding some of its pillars to be legitimate and others to be problematic. Chief among those that are not well-grounded is the requisite distinction between good and bad humour. In a move reminiscent of Kant's taking Hume's distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas and showing it to conflate two distinct distinctions, Schweizer takes the good humour/bad humour distinction to conflate two distinctions: (1) soft versus hard humour and (2) transgressive versus reactionary humour. The hard/soft distinction has Freudian overtones in that it resembles the tendentious/non-tendentious distinction Freud employs (Freud 1955 [1905]: 96). The transgressive/reactionary distinction focuses on the liminal aspect of much humour, that is, humour often plays at social, ethical, or logical boundaries. This means that some humorous utterances can have the effect of questioning whether these boundaries are legitimate. Such humour acts are to be considered transgressive since they raise the real possibility of transgressing the pre-established boundary. But there are jokes that do the opposite. Ethnic jokes that trade on stereotypes, for example, reinforce the "us versus them" divisions by making entire groups the butt of jokes and that further entrenches outgroups' lack of social capital. With these two perpendicular distinctions, we now have four categories of humour.

To maintain one's position as a philosopher of humour in good standing, it is required that all new books rehearse the standard humour theories (superiority, play, relief, and incongruity), make the claim that none of these theories succeed in supplying necessary and sufficient conditions that account for all humour acts, and note that they are not mutually exclusive. Schweizer not only keeps his union membership card, but goes the standard route one better in using his two distinctions to categorise the jokes that are well-accounted for by each humour theory. His four categories, he argues, allows us to generate a general typology of humour. This will likely be seen as the important contribution of this book for the broader philosophy of humour discourse, that is, the conversation beyond questions of humour and religion.

With this new technical tool in hand, Schweizer returns to the question of laughter theology and the possibility of distinguishing good humour from bad humour. The necessary distinction should require acceptable Christian humour to be placed in one or two of the four categories, leaving the remaining boxes to contain the unacceptable humour. And there, Schweizer argues in great detail, is the rub. If you examine a wide range of humorous texts that in some way mention Christian doctrine or believers, some being the epitome of what is intuitive held to be good, clean, wholesome, Christian humour and others being clear examples of the sort of humour acts good Christians would seek to avoid or, indeed, quash, then you would expect to find clear differences in terms of what categories of humour the constituent jokes occupy. But alas, Schweizer contends, humorous texts are complex in that they invariably contain elements of all four categories.

To demonstrate this, Schweizer considers two streams of Christian humour – humour aimed at Christians and Christianity from the 14th century to Twitter, and comedy by contemporary Christian stand-up comedians. Selecting representative case studies from both streams, Schweizer walks the reader through the texts, examining the range of humorous utterances made. The obvious concern with making generalised claims about 700 years of humour from a small handful of selected instances is cherry-picking, especially when Schweizer contends that we see a trend in the first stream. While quibbles about outliers could, of course, be made, the breadth and importance

of the analysed texts should be thought a good sample. Schweizer works the reader through Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, France's *The Revolt of the Angels*, Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Morrow's *The Godhead Trilogy*, Currie's *God is Dead*, and Javerbaum's *The Last Testament: A Memoir by God*.

This tour of the literature comprises the larger part of the book. It contains the evidence for the argument being made. In the long and varied tradition of humour aimed at Christianity, we see two things. First, all of the texts – from the seemingly softest to the most liminal – make use of humour in all four of Schweizer's categories. Secondly, there is a detectable trajectory within the history of literature that treats Christianity humorously. We see an increasing liberalisation in the sphere of subjects one can treat as the butt of jokes.

The earliest of the texts considered focus their comic venom on hypocritical clergy. There is a long tradition in European (especially Italian) jokes of playing with the character of the lascivious and greedy priest or monk. The incongruity of those who have supposedly dedicated their lives to seeking that which is holy instead using their wiles to seek physical pleasure and material goods allows us to laugh at the expense of individuals who have lost their way. The way and the institution paving the way are never mocked, only those who false pretend to be following it.

But when we hit the Enlightenment, we see a radical shift. We start to see satire of theological doctrines. We not only laugh at the expense of Professor Pangloss himself, but also at the Leibnizian views he espouses. What is mocked now are both individuals and human interpretations of doctrine. The 19th century further broadens the range of targets to include religious institutions. The Church finds itself slipping on banana peels. The 20th century broadens the sphere even greater so that the Almighty Himself becomes an object of parody. Finally, in the 21st century, the Holy Scriptures are now ripe for satiric revision.

This is one sense in which humour has triumphed over religion. Religion had limited the scope of allowable targets of humour, but social and intellectual progress has inflated the bubble ever-larger until now nothing remains off limits. The idea that we may mock the profane, but not the sacred has been lost.

But while the sacred is no longer sacrosanct, this does not necessarily equate to humour diminishing the holy. Indeed, in many cases, Schweizer points out a Kierkegaardian result (Kierkegaard 1992 [1846]). It is in the irony and humour about Christianity that we can more clearly see the depth and complexity of the nature of the Divine. There are philosophical conundrums inherent in Christianity. The best humour about Christianity does not create a straw Jesus to knock off its cross, but rather allows us a clearer formulation of the real conceptual questions that Christian theology presents.

That irony finds its converse in the consideration of explicitly Christian stand-up comedians. Performers like Mark Lowry, Brad Stine, and Anthony Griffith aim their routines at Christian congregants and the larger Christian conservative population. One might think that an act whose foundation is a thoroughgoing commitment to Christianity would therefore be perfectly in line with the sort of humour deemed desirable by the Christian theologians of laughter. But this is not the case. We see, even in the softer Lowry, clear examples that would have to be categorised as the sort of abrasive negative humour that Christians should shun.

Should we call out this hypocrisy and demand that these Christians walk it like they talk it? That is not Schweizer's line at all. Of course, he argues, within any sizeable humorous text, written or performed, there will be comedic elements in all four of the categories. What this shows is not

a lack of consistency by Christians, but something universal about humorous texts. Their inherent complexity will make them multifaceted. This is something we need to accept.

This acceptance leads to a form of political libertarianism. Because there is no possible clean and universal good humour/bad humour line to be drawn, we should give up trying to police humorous speech, religious or otherwise. This does not entail humour to be amoral. It just means that conversations about humour ethics will require inclusion of the intricacies of the world. We have no simple enforceable legalistic solution to questions of humour ethics, so while philosophers should continue the discussion, they must do so in an open political context in which challenging sometimes morally problematic humorous acts will be a part of popular discourse.

There is good reason to be optimistic about the state of philosophy of humour. We are seeing a host of smart, well-argued, insightful books coming out that champion very different approaches to the field's central questions, that take issue with each other, and that build off of insights from each other. Schweizer's book is one more in that category. The discourse in philosophy of humour is thriving and Schweizer's contribution to it is not to be missed.

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