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Author Address: hthomson@csu.edu.au/

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God and the infinitely comic:

**On Faith and Humour**

Heather Thomson

I would like to thank all those who have made it possible for me to be here tonight. First, the amoebas, then those fish that crawled out of the water on their fins – now that was a creative act – then the dinosaurs, through to the hominoids and all that has led up to me standing here tonight. Many people begin their speeches by acknowledging the shoulders on which they stand. Instead, I am acknowledging all those wombs from which I have emerged, including the womb of the earth.

Humour and laughter emerged late in the evolutionary process, and I am glad that I can count myself among the laughing animals. However, talking about humour is no easy matter. It is an elusive topic. One theologian has said that attempting to get a grip on humour or laughter is like trying to put the sea in a bottle, or pack the wind in a chest.¹ May I suggest another metaphor. When I was in Africa earlier this year I saw some baby elephants wrestling in the mud. The first one very inelegantly slid into the mud on its tummy. The second elephant sat on top of the first. The third parked itself on top of the other two until the first one wriggled and the others fell off. Then it was on. More joined in and soon there was this very messy, slippery mass of elephant legs and trunks, and it was difficult to discern what belonged to whom. They were having so much fun I wanted to join them. Wisely I chose against this, but I find myself today wrestling with a very messy, slippery topic, and it is difficult to discern what belongs where. But since I am dragging all of you with me into these muddy waters, I am having my mud-wrestle after all.

The first thing to notice about humour is that it is a human activity. We laugh at ourselves and each other. We don’t usually laugh at the trees and the rocks. Nor do we see two kangaroos laughing because their mate ran into a gum tree. They can only look on dumbly at what we might find funny. Human beings are the laughing animals, and that makes us the laughable ones as well. There is something ridiculous about being human. I am going to consider some of the theories put forward by philosophers and psychologists to explain our sense of humour and what makes us funny. I will then look at what theologians have to contribute to this question. What difference does God make to our understanding of humour?

**General theories of humour**

One place to begin our thinking about humour is with some of the earliest known thoughts about humour that have had a great influence on this subject. I am referring to Plato, the Greek philosopher, writing around 400 BCE. Among other things, Plato occupied himself with the question, What makes human beings ridiculous? He answered this in two ways.

First, Plato thought that people are ridiculous when they show ignorance of themselves. What makes people funny is when they think they are better looking than

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they actually are, richer or more virtuous than they actually are. In short, it is when people puff themselves up, inflate themselves, and can’t see the difference between their false assumptions and true knowledge. Others can see through the pretence, and laugh at the disparity.  

A lot of comedy is spent laughing at pomposity, at those who think they are great and good looking. The comedians prick the bubble and make it burst. Self-delusion shows that we are ignorant or stupid, whereas having true self-knowledge is the path to wisdom. For Plato, there is a kind of malicious pleasure in seeing the pretences and ignorance of others. Humour is one of the ‘mixed pleasures’ of the soul, and derives from a basic envy or malice that rejoices in the misfortunes of other people. Ignorance is one of those misfortunes. Hence, Plato did not think very highly of humour, for it comes from comparing ourselves with others and their fortunes. We shouldn’t be laughing at ignorance, he thought, nor at the ridiculous behaviour of trying to puff oneself up in relation to others. The true philosopher should be teaching people the truth, not laughing at them.

However there was a second way in which Plato saw people as ludicrous. It comes from a story he had heard about Thales, the father of Greek philosophy. Apparently, Thales fell down a well while looking up at the stars. As if that were not bad enough, a woman saw him fall and told everybody about it. So the story spread, and we can only presume, so did the laughter. It spread even further when Plato wrote it down for posterity. The philosopher was so intent on contemplating the heavens that he wasn’t watching what was at his feet. We are not sure how long Thales was down the well—he came up with the philosophy that ‘all is water’, so he could have been down there a very long time.

Plato contrasts the philosopher with another character he also thinks is funny—the lawyer. A lawyer is a person of affairs, quite at home in the world, very much with his feet on the ground, unlike the bumbling philosopher. But that is the lawyer’s problem. His horizon is too small and too self-interested. He takes no time out for solitude or contemplation. If the lawyer is taken into the philosopher’s domain, he is dizzied by the height, dismayed and lost, and can only stammer out his words.

So both of these characters are ridiculously at fault if they are so immersed in their own domains that they cannot enter each other’s. If you have your head in the clouds and are only concerned with the big picture, you will be reminded that you are an earth creature when you fall down the well. On the other hand, if you never put your head up and contemplate greater things, you are also ridiculous. What makes you different from the cows and the sheep?

Plato’s views on humour lasted a long time, and still have a contribution to make. Puffing ourselves up or being all out of balance is still the stuff of humour. Plato’s views of the philosopher and the lawyer have been taken up by more contemporary

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theologians, not as two different characters, but as two sides to each of our characters, the spiritual and the physical. It is the balance that is important.

It interests me that we still laugh at people who fall over, or fall down, or run into telegraph poles as they are walking down the street. Plato offered one explanation for this – that they were too much concerned with something else in their minds, and not enough with what was in front of them. The program on TV called “Funniest Home videos” is almost all about people falling over and bumping into things: a bride tripping over at her wedding, Grandma falling into a bush at a BBQ, Uncle Joe falling into the swimming pool. This program is very popular. It belongs to the comedy of everyday life, where the physical seems to debunk the spiritual.

We could bring one more elephant into the mud at this point and add a psychological view. The twentieth century psychologist, Sigmund Freud, points out that no matter how sensible or mature we may be, ‘everyone is in fact exposed, without any defence, to being made comic’. It involves things like falling up the stairs as we go to receive an award in front of the entire school, being a person of prominence and tripping over in public, or having wind escape from our bodies in a very serious moment. In these circumstances, Freud says that we have a certain sense of what mature, civilised behaviour is like, and we have inadvertently broken the rules. We therefore look and feel foolish, and it can be very embarrassing – but funny to others.

One more elephant is needed for our mud-wrestle at this point – Arthur Koestler and the incongruity theory of humour. Koestler argues that we laugh at what is incongruous. We perceive a comic clash, for example between our subjective experience and the objective world. The ‘wittiest discovery of homo sapiens’ was our ability to intersect ‘subjective experience with an objective frame of reference’. For example, we have plans for the day, hopes to get certain things done, yet the world that we encounter that day may include traffic jams, a computer crash, or the fact that you spill your lunch down the front of you just before an important meeting. The incongruity of your subjective plans and desires and the objective world can be tragic or a nuisance, but it also makes for comedy.

The question, or argument, that theorists of humour wrestle with concerns these incongruities, and how to define them. I will mention one other way before moving on to the theologians.

I spoke of Freud earlier. In his book on jokes and humour, he maintains that there is a basic incongruity between our drives and animal appetites, on the one hand, and having to live in a civilised world, on the other. It is the process of socialisation that clashes with what we really want to do if we had the choice. Having to live in civilised society is quite a strain at times. You have to wear certain clothes and behave in certain ways, whereas some days you might rather be sitting at home scratching yourself. Freud says that we never really get rid of the feelings that we repress in order to be civil – feelings of aggression and sexual desires beyond the bounds of good behaviour. Some comic characters embody the sorts of uncivilised people we

would like to be. They are rude and gross and we enjoy them vicariously. A lot of humour, says Freud, is an expression of what has been repressed for the sake of society, and hence it is aggressive and sexual and politically incorrect. And he admires the irrepressibility of human desire.

These are all good and interesting theories of humour, and we have much to learn from them. Does Christian theology have anything to add? You have heard theology described as ‘faith seeking understanding’. Now we are looking at faith seeking understanding…of humour.

Theological views of humour

Not many theologians have dipped their toes into these muddy waters, or have written on this topic in any sustained way. But those who have tend to approach the subject of humour from particular theological doctrines. Some consider humour primarily through a doctrine of creation, others from a doctrine of the Fall, and still others from the doctrine of redemption, or eschatology.

Humour from creation

Most theologians of humour would agree that humour belongs to creation, that our creation was itself a kind of a joke.8 We human beings are this incongruous mix of dust and God. We belong both to earth and to heaven. We are spiritual and physical, and these are at times in tension with each other, pulling in different directions. It is like Plato’s philosopher and lawyer, but this time intrinsic to each person. There is a calling upon us from heaven to be more than just earth animals, yet we are still subject to all the laws of gravity, physics, chemistry and time, and we cannot escape our earth-bound existence. We are foolish if we try too hard to escape our feet of clay, and lose ourselves in the clouds. Sooner or later we will come crashing back to earth. On the other hand, we are foolish if we do not lift up our heads and listen to the call of God upon us, to be more than the cows and the sheep. We would be denying our existence as spiritual beings, made in the image of God.

Humour emerges from the relation between heaven and earth, in getting this out of balance or failing to acknowledge or to live with some integrity with both sides of the equation.

While there are interesting insights here on humour from a doctrine of creation, what difference does the Fall make to our understanding of humour?

Humour from the doctrine of sin

The main theorist who advocates that we need a doctrine of sin to understand humour is the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard agreed that humour comes from creation, from the incongruous mix that we are. In his words, we belong to both the finite and the infinite, to time and eternity, to freedom and necessity.9 The trick is

to integrate each of these aspects of ourselves and to get them into some sort of workable balance.

However, Kierkegaard wanted to add something to this view that would account for what makes us ridiculous. He wanted to draw a distinction between the approach of Greek philosophy and that of Christian theology. For Plato, as we saw, people are ridiculous when they are ignorant, and think they are better looking, richer or more virtuous than they really are. If we could teach such people the truth about themselves, then they would listen and learn and no longer be ignorant and hence, ridiculous. If they knew the good and the true, they would live accordingly.

For Kierkegaard, however, this is not enough. As the apostle Paul knew, we can know what is good and still not do it (Rom 7:15). We wilfully refuse to do what is good, or we weakly hide from our responsibilities to do what should be done. Either way, the refusal to do the good is what Kierkegaard believes makes us ‘infinitely comic’. He argues for a strong doctrine of original sin to understand humour.

At first glance, this seems to fall into a rather judgmental stance, the kind of view that Plato was arguing against. It really is laughing at people and their behaviour. But when you think about what we do laugh at in comic characters, it is precisely this – their ducking and weaving responsibility, their refusal to be mature and grown-up, or their neglect of responsible, civilised behaviour. Comedians make an art form of what Kierkegaard calls the ‘infinitely comic’.

One of the best examples of this comes from an episode of *Seinfeld*. This scene is irrefutable evidence that Kierkegaard has a point. Here we laugh at one of the characters, George, because he falls so short of being the mature adult he is meant to be. George is basically a loser, who describes himself as short, balding, unemployed and still living with his parents. In this episode, George is at the house of his new girlfriend, Robyn, who is holding a birthday party for her young son. Robyn’s mother and other elderly women are there, lots of children, and a clown for entertainment. George is standing near the kitchen when he smells smoke and he realises that a fire has broken out. It is his response to the fire that is the issue.

He yells, ‘Fire!’ and runs out of the house in a panic, knocking down the women and children as he goes. Later, when George is confronted by Robyn and a crowd of others, he attempts to defend his outrageously self-centred behaviour:

George: I was trying to lead the way. We needed someone to lead the way to safety.
Robyn: But you yelled, ‘Get out of my way’.
George: Because, as the leader, if I died, then all hope is lost. Who would lead? The clown? Instead of castigating me, you should be thanking me. What sort of topsy-turvy world do we live in where heroes are cast as villains, brave men as cowards?
Robyn: But I saw you push the women and children out of the way in a mad panic. I saw you knock them down. And when you ran out, you left everyone behind.

**George**: Seemingly, seemingly. To the untrained eye, I can fully understand how you got that impression. What looked like pushing, what looked like knocking down was a safety precaution. In a fire, you stay close to the ground. Am I right? And when I ran out that door … I was risking my life, making sure the exit was clear. Any other questions?

**Fireman**: How do you live with yourself?

**George**: (quietly) It’s not easy.

Later, in the coffee shop, George talks with Jerry:

**George**: So, she doesn’t want to see me anymore.

**Jerry**: Did you knock her over too, or just the kids?

**George**: No, her too. And her mother.

**Jerry**: Really? Her mother.

**George**: Yeah. I may have stepped on her arm, too, I don’t know.

**Jerry**: You probably couldn’t see because of the smoke.

**George**: Yeah. But it was somebody’s arm.

**Jerry**: So you feel ‘women and children first’, in this day and age, is somewhat of an antiquated notion.

**George**: To some degree.

**Jerry**: So basically, it’s every man, woman, child, and invalid for themselves.

**George**: In a manner of speaking.

**Jerry**: Well, it’s honest.

**George**: Yeah. She should be commending me for treating everyone like equals.

**Jerry**: Well, perhaps when she’s released from the burn centre, she’ll see things differently.

**George**: Perhaps.

**Jerry**: So, what was the fire? Just a couple of greasy hamburgers?

**George**: Yeah. Eric the Clown put it out with his big shoe.11

If George was acting with integrity as a responsible person, he would have said, ‘Look, I panicked. I am really, really sorry. Are you all right?’ If George had responded this way he would have been a better man for it. But he would not have been a comic character. What made him comical, ridiculous, was that he refused to be good, and he even tried to defend his atrocious behaviour. He pretended his cowardice was really heroism. Everyone could see through his pretence. Even George could see through it. In Kierkegaard’s terms, George is comical because he rebels against the great privilege and responsibility of being a human self. He forfeits this and instead puts ultimate value in gaining approval from the crowd. Our value rests in our relation to God, not in pandering to the crowd.

For Kierkegaard, we know intuitively when someone is wilfully wrong or weakly irresponsible, and see these responses as laughable, because these people could and should be so much more. Comic characters base themselves on such behaviour, exaggerate it, and represent it back to us. They offer us a mirror to look into for self-reflection, and contribute to the time when we are next contemplating the question, ‘How shall I live?’ One answer is – *not* like George Costanza.

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Kierkegaard’s contribution is to highlight the incongruity between the greatness that is our calling as human beings and the weakness, or wilful refusal to take hold of our potential, and to squander it in foolish behaviour. In Christian theology, we should be able to look within ourselves and others, and to see something of God, something that is sacred and honourable, worthy of dignity and respect. But that isn’t always the case. Comedians remind us that we are far from the mark. What happens, for example, if George Costanza looks within? What does he find?

In this scene, George is pining over his ex-girlfriend, Susan, and wants to get back with her even though, as his friends remind him, he complained about their relationship all the time he was with her. George seeks advice from Kramer:

**George**: Kramer, should I call Susan?

**Kramer**: Now what does the little man inside you say? See, you gotta listen to the little man.

**George**: My little man doesn’t know.

**Kramer**: The little man knows all.

**George**: My little man’s an idiot.¹²

George is right – he is an idiot. From this perspective humour is meant to lead us into faith in God, for it is showing us how ludicrous it would be to put our ultimate trust and faith in anything human. We may be made in the image of God, but on our own we are far from it.

**Humour from redemption or eschatology**

Finally, some theologians highlight the difference that a doctrine of redemption makes to understanding humour and laughter. The American sociologist Peter Berger makes an important contribution here. He agrees that human beings are an incongruous mix of body and spirit and that the two continually debunk each other. What he adds is that in Christian theology, our destiny lies with God, that the victory has already been won in Christ, and that this world of gravity is giving way to the world of grace. Humour from the perspective of creation helps us to accept our earth-bound existence; humour from the perspective of redemption helps us not to claim too much for the temporal world, but rather to put our trust in God.

Erasmus, in his satire *The Praise of Folly*, takes us out of our earth-focused existence and gives us a view of ourselves from the orb of the moon. He suggests that if we look down from there we would see,

thick swarms as it were of flies and gnats, that were quarrelling with each other, justling, fighting, fluttering, skipping, playing, just new produced, soon after decaying, and then immediately vanishing; and it can scarce be thought how many tumults and tragedies so inconsiderate a creature as man does give occasion to, and that in so short a space as a small span of life…¹³

Erasmus is helpful in taking us beyond our usual day-to-day personal perspective where little things look so big. He reverses the telescope and turns it around onto us.

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from the outside, where we look small and insignificant. The theologians of humour from the doctrine of end times take this one step further, to the perspective of God looking down on it all. This is a healthy view to cultivate, as it puts into perspective some of the things that we blow up as tragedies that don’t appear to be so from the largest of all horizons. But it does assume that God is not merely looking down on us. Rather, God is working for us and is among us and is redeeming the whole.

Humour unmasks human pretensions to power and glory, made ridiculous when looked at from the orb of the moon, let alone from a God’s-eye view. It suggests that nothing human should ever be taken ultimately seriously. Therefore a sense of humour through Christian faith gives us an awareness that whatever seems to be insurmountable trouble is already swallowed up in Christ’s victory. As Peter Berger puts it, ‘Nothing human is ultimately dangerous, not even the most determined stupidity. Thus nothing human can ultimately keep us from the liberation of laughter.’

Laughter comes from our freedom from all things human, all stupidities and vanities and even evil. It is from faith and trust in God, with the resurrection as its strongest symbol. One theologian called the resurrection ‘the greatest stunt of all’. Tragedy did not win. Freedom and possibility, beyond human imagination, were the last word. Knowing this, we are free to laugh heartily.

I have outlined how theologians have something to contribute to our understanding of humour. We still have not quite bottled it, but we have been given plenty to think about. I want to go on to address the question of humour and ethics.

**Humour and ethics**

As we have seen, Plato did not have a high view of humour and laughter. For him, laughter was at the expense of ignorance, and we should be trying to teach and guide the ignorant, not laugh at them. There is a strong strand within Christian theology that believed laughter was frivolous, and it was frowned upon as not fitting for the serious task of the Christian life. Yet even those theologians who have a positive view of humour and laughter still talk about ethical constraints. Humour, like any other human knowledge or endeavour, carries interests, and these are not always good or pretty. Some humour is derogatory and serves to incite biases, hatred or violence against certain groups of people. Theologians certainly question such uses of humour. It may be allowing us to express what has been repressed in order for us to be civilised, in the Freudian view, but it is doing so in a certain spirit which is not constructive, or can be downright offensive or dangerous. So I see limits to humour in that ethical sense, choices to face in terms of situation and care of the less powerful. Humour can serve more positive interests such as the cultivation of peace and goodwill rather than of hatred.

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Joking back

However, I do want to note a form of humour which may be derogatory or challenging, but which I believe is justified. It is from those who have been in less powerful positions who are now fighting back for equality. When I was in Africa, I talked with a class about Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian novelist known to them, who wrote an essay published in 2000 called *Home and Exile*. Achebe spoke of the process of ‘writing back’, borrowing a Salmon Rushdie phrase, ‘the empire writes back’. Those who had been colonised were now writing with their own voices as a counter-measure to all that had been mis-written about them by the empire. I argued that feminist theology was also a form of ‘writing back’. Now I am adding to this process to include ‘joking back’.

I don’t know what Africans say when they ‘joke back’ about white people. I did ask but didn’t get very far. I do however have a few examples of women joking back. The first is a cartoon by an Australian woman who was tired of the patriarchal creation story in the Old Testament, particularly the way it has been used to keep women in a secondary place, created second from and for men. Instead, she has drawn an alternative creation story, with God as a rather large woman knitting creation. (Cf. Psalm 139:13, ‘You did knit me together in my mother’s womb.’) In this creation story, the woman is made first.

The second example is based on a puzzle given to philosophy students: If a tree falls in a forest and nobody hears it, does it make a sound? The ‘women joking back’ version goes like this: If a man speaks in a forest and nobody hears him, is he still wrong? I could go to town on this point, of course, but you get the idea — I can justify humour that is joking back, even if it is derogatory, because it is part of a process of reclaiming what had been neglected or taken away.

Humour against God

For theologians of humour there is another question of ethics. Is it all right to laugh at God? Is it not a serious business to turn one’s mouth against God in derision?

I don’t see much of a problem with laughter at the church or at religious people and their practices and foibles. Religious humour can be quite constructive in showing us where we church people can improve if we want to be taken seriously. It can warmly affirm faith while laughing at the gap between the real and the ideal in the Christian life. But I am talking about the more aggressive humour that laughs not just at Christians and the church but at God. What are we to make of this?

In Graeme Garrett’s book, *God Matters*, you will find a detailed discussion of religious humour, right along the spectrum from euphemy to blasphemy. I would highly recommend that chapter as a good read. For my purposes here, I will touch on either ends of the spectrum to give you an idea of the ethical issue I am wrestling with, and will do so using two cartoons. These cartoons are both of the crucifixion.

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19. I heard this as a joke. I do not know the source, but have heard an alternative version: If a man speaks in a kitchen and nobody hears him, is he still wrong?
The first, from Michael Leunig, is one that you might muse on.\textsuperscript{21} It is delightful in that although it depicts Jesus on the cross, it does so in the broader horizon of the hill, the moon in the sky, a little bird on top of the cross, and an angel catching the blood from Jesus’ side in a cup. It is saying that, whatever is happening here, it is of God. Heaven is present, as shown by the angel and the larger horizons in which this scene is set.

The other cartoon demonstrating scornful humour is from a piece of graffiti scratched on a Roman wall in the first century CE.\textsuperscript{22} The writing says: ‘Alexamenos worships his God’. It is a joke against a Christian boy, Alexamenos, for worshipping a god who is a failed, crucified, so-called saviour. Jesus is depicted as a man on a cross with an ass’s head. So, by implication, all Christians must be asses for worshipping him.

This would have been very derogatory and offensive for Christians at the time, but for those who agreed with it, the graffiti would have been a real hoot. Religious humour runs right along the spectrum between these two, but the ethical issue is raised with the second one. You can’t get more offensive to Christians than to laugh at the cross.

The gospels themselves record that Jesus was mocked during his crucifixion. That was not the first time he was laughed at. When Jesus says in Mark 5:39-40 that Jairus’ daughter is ‘not dead but sleeping’, those present laughed. But it is towards the end of the story that we get the clearest picture of the laughed-at God. Looking at this will give us clues as to possible responses to offensive religious humour.

The Roman soldiers made great sport of Jesus. That he was a so-called king seemed ludicrous since he had no kingdom. So they gave him a crown of thorns and a scarlet robe, and hailed him ‘King of the Jews’, bowing down on their knees in mock homage (Matthew 27:27-31). Later, Jesus was taunted on the cross.

Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’ In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said “I am God’s Son”’. The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. (Matthew 27:39-44)

At the time, Jesus did not look like the saviour of the world, the King of the Jews, the expected Messiah. We do not know how any of us would have reacted if we had been

\textsuperscript{21} From M. Leunig, \textit{The Prayer Tree}, Collins Dove, North Blackburn, 1991 (no page numbers).
\textsuperscript{22} This cartoon can be seen at: http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/alex_graffito.htm
there. But our question is about humour. What might we learn from this about the limits of humour?

There are two responses I wish to make. First, by ridiculing the obvious – that Jesus did not look as if he were Messiah material – the on-lookers saw no further than a fool dying on a cross. They left no room for there to be some meaning in the situation beyond which their minds could conceive or grasp at the time. There was no acknowledgment that maybe something was happening here, behind the scenes, that was of God.

In the cartoon, ‘Alexamenos worships his God’, you will notice that there is no horizon. It depicts no other world beyond that which is immediately in front of the viewer. This is in contrast to the Leunig cartoon of the crucifixion. He has not only drawn a horizon to place the moment in a larger world, and a moon in the sky to place the earth in the universe, but has included an angel to signal that what happens on earth is in the context of heaven, the spiritual realm. The problem with those who scorned and mocked at the foot of the cross is that their perspective was too small.

Humour, then, can be closed-minded. This is one of its limits. To have laughed at Jesus on the cross would have required a certain attitude of mind, an assumption that one had the situation all worked out and summed up. It would not have allowed for any mystery or trust that more may be happening beyond their small horizons. This is what I see as the offence of blasphemy – closed-mindedness – and it is an offence that may carry with it a serious arrogance and have deadly consequences.

My second response to the laughter at the foot of the cross concerns the response of the church. Although laughter at God, or what is held sacred by others, is a serious business, it should not be taken as seriously as it sometimes has been. This can be argued theologically in several ways. Sara Maitland works from the doctrine of creation when she says,

The whole premise of a religion based on a God who creates *ex nihilo*, is that this God is cleverer than the creation… If we truly believe in a God like this, a God of energy and infiniteness, can we honestly believe at the same time that this God’s feelings are so delicate, this God’s eternity so frail that either can be damaged by the creative fantasies of any mere mortal?23

We can make a similar point from Christology. What was shown in the account of the laughed-at God was that God has taken mockery and derision into God’s self, and has risen above it. As religious people we do not need to act violently to protect God. We do not need to censor and suppress criticism against God, for God is greater and more than anything we humans can say, no matter how wittily we may say it.

Further, those of us in the church who feel offended by some religious humour, or offended on behalf of God, may do well to reflect on what honouring God means. I am not defending outright offensive behaviour, since it is not respectful of other people’s beliefs. Rather, I am suggesting that honouring God is not primarily a matter

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of words, but of lives lived. It has to do with the quality of the communities that make up our churches. So, ‘rather than ban the vocabulary of blasphemy we must rob it of all force…thus, the response to blasphemy is not legal control but mission’.24 That is, rather than trying to ban blasphemy and derision, it is better to try to live the kinds of lives that take away the grounds for scorn – to show that having and living this faith is admirable and contributes to peace and reconciliation in the world. In terms of the incongruities of humour, it is lessening the gap between the ideals of church and the ‘falling short’ of actual church life and belief.

We have been wrestling in the mud with elephants, I mean theorists, of humour in an attempt to understanding ourselves as the laughing animals. Theologians have tended to approach humour from different theological doctrines. Keeping these in tension – creation, fall and redemption – we get a better idea of what makes us so incongruous. We are earth-bound yet called to make something of ourselves. We are made in the image of God, yet fall short of the glory of God. When we look within we may glimpse God, the devil or a damn fool.

Contemplating God and the infinitely comic has been a significant spiritual exercise for me over the years. It has helmed me to transcend my little subjective world and to see myself in a much larger context, from those fish that crawled out of the swamp on fins to where we are now – animals who laugh. More than that, it has made me wonder about God and God’s call upon us and enabled me to appreciate the freedom, the creativity and the gift of laughter.