

The Last Laugh

by David Middleton

Ironies of Faith: The Laughter at the Heart of Christian Literature

by Anthony Esolen

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In *Ironies of Faith: The Laughter at the Heart of Christian Literature*, Anthony Esolen argues that Christianity introduced into European literature a new understanding of irony, an understanding found neither in the classical literature of the pre-Christian West nor in the various strains of post-Christian literary theory that infect the academy today. Rejecting self-contradicting and self-devouring notions of irony that lead to relativism or even nihilism, Esolen posits three forms of Christian irony—of time, power, and love.

As Esolen states in the Preface, these ironies depend on

the Christian mysteries of incarnation and transcendence, free will and design, sin and redemption, blindness and vision, freedom and submission, and, most of all, the subtle strand that links human love to the love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Such ironies, as the reference to the closing lines of Dante's *Divine Comedy* indicates, are dependent on a "disjunction between planes of knowledge"—the difference between what God knows and what we know, a disjunction evident in the placement in Dante's Hell, Purgatory, or Heaven of persons whose earthly status often differed greatly from their place in eternity, and also in the story of the ram that God unexpectedly provides Abraham to sacrifice in place of Isaac. Postmodern irony rests on the statement that all is relative or absurd or indeterminate, which is put forth as an absolute in logical violation of its very claim. Christian irony does not leave us with a world deconstructed into a meaninglessness that consumes yet also rebuts itself. Rather, it discloses a deeper and happier order (worthy of the "laughter" of the book's subtitle). As Esolen says,

[Christian] irony arises . . . from

the ignorance of unseen or unexpected order . . . from the failure to note subtleties, or from seeing subtleties that are not there, especially when the ignorance and the failure are highlighted before observers in a better position to see the truth.

True irony begins in "the humility of wonder," which Esolen finds in authors such as the anonymous "Pearl" poet, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Hopkins, who put God, Creation, and others—not themselves—at the center of their works.

Esolen's survey of examples of the ironies of time, power, and love in European literature is wide ranging. As an illustration of the irony of time, Shakespeare's *Tempest* demonstrates that God governs the desires of evil men and restores the just to power in His own good time. Ending with a harvest dance, *The Tempest* also demonstrates that "For Christians the rhythm of the seasons reflects God's order: it is nature's prayerful office of the year." In Tolkien's story "Leaf, by Niggle," a picture of a tree by a negligible artist, though unfinished, holds within its one finished portion—a leaf—what in eternity is revealed: an image of the entire tree. The leaf also suggests the ancient mythic image of the cosmos as world-tree. Esolen is surely right in saying that we cannot know whether the purportedly great events that make up our chronicles are, in God's eyes, really the most important events in human history. Niggle's leaf, like Blake's grain of sand, contains eternity within itself in a way that whole shelves of naturalistic fiction can never hope to do. What kind of man would Augustine have been, Esolen asks, and what effect, if any, would he have had on Western civilization but for the faith of his mother, Monica?

The irony of power is beautifully examined in Esolen's commentary on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which sterile feminist notions of equality and the virtual interchangeability of the sexes are contrasted with the Christian concept of an egalitarianism within a hierarchy of submission—Eve to Adam, and Adam to God—in which the servant-leader, Adam, is charged to lay down his life for Eve if need be, just as Christ as the New Adam would lay down His life for all humanity. Indeed, throughout this book, Esolen reminds us repeatedly of biblical examples of the irony of power, bringing to mind God's use of the younger son, the defeated people, the last faithful proph-

et, Gideon's band, the flawed man (Moses, David, Peter), and the ironic reversal of expectations—the Messiah born as a helpless Child Who will one day enter Jerusalem not with sword and shield but on the back of an ass, to die as a criminal, on a cross, yet thereby to establish His Kingdom.

The irony of love is shown to inform such works as George Herbert's "Love (III)," in which the poet's soul arrives in Heaven as a patron comes to a tavern, yet not, as the soul expects, to serve Love (Christ) but to be served by Love in the form of a tavern waiter. Spenser's sonnet sequence *Amoretti* reveals the subtle interplay of *eros* and *agape*, or, as Spenser says, addressing the woman he will marry, "So let us loue, deare loue, lyke as we ought, / loue is the lesson which the Lord vs taught." Such redeeming love often comes by way of a child. Examples Esolen considers include Tiny Tim in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, who transforms Scrooge into a childlike man ("I'm quite a baby") so as to be able to enter the kingdom of heaven by loving others more than money; and, supremely, the daughter who dies at two in "The Pearl." By having the dead child meet her inconsolable father, "The Pearl" brings together all three Christian ironies that Esolen examines, revealing that, from God's perspective, all of time is providentially ordered; that a child, even a dead child, has the power to take her father's grief and make it into an agent for his spiritual rebirth; and that the love of Christ as seen in her will lead the father to desire not a return of his dead child but union with the Christ Child, Who made the daughter and to Whose heavenly bosom the child has been recalled.

Esolen has tried to show "that the teachings of Christianity give to irony a richer constellation of possibilities than the pagan world could have supposed existed." In the end, he believes, "The Christian faith teaches that the last laugh is on the world."

Anthony Esolen's *Ironies of Faith* is a much-needed Christian response to radical contemporary theorists whose corrosive irony can only destroy itself; by teaching us how to read the great works of the Christian imagination, he helps to save them from those who seek their annihilation.

David Middleton is poet in residence and the Alcee Fortier Distinguished Professor at Nicholls State University.

The Politics of Laughter

by Christie Davies

Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict

by Paul Lewis

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Paul Lewis, a professor of English at Boston College, is one of America's most eminent scholars of humor. With this book, he has written another very thoroughly researched study of contemporary American humor, ranging from the "positive humor" and "laughter club" movements that use humor to promote health and efficiency, peace and uplift, to the "killing humor" of American jokes and comedies that seemingly violate all norms of kindness and restraint.

Lewis is quite rightly skeptical of the claims of the laughter clubs, hospital clowns, and corporate humor consultants who have come to constitute both something approaching a New Age religion and a substantial and prosperous business sector. His detailed review of the now-extensive research literature shows, however, that there is no clear link between humor and health. Likewise, he is able to deflate the claim that humor reduces hostility and makes people feel good by showing that it very often achieves the opposite result.

Lewis's accounts of his personal encounters with the professional humor practitioners are both insightful and wryly funny. The question remains, however: Does it matter that these people are fakes? The positive-humor movement neither leads patients to ignore more effective cures (as homeopathy sometimes does), nor can it inflict direct harm on patients (as psychoanalysis often does). No one takes "positive humor" seriously as an intellectual program in the way that many do the vacuous and unverifiable propositions of Freud and company.

The same point applies in relation to Lewis's fascinating and detailed account of the "killing jokes" of the 1980's and 90's about famines and dead babies, the killing of lawyers and therapists, and the amusement drawn from the lives of such murderers as Jeffrey Dahmer and O.J. Simpson. Lewis links this humor to the

social theories of that archliberal Baron Giddens of Southgate, which claim that we are all in a state of anxiety and denial about impending environmental catastrophe. Has Lewis forgotten the letters written by Walter Sickert when pretending to be Jack the Ripper, the *Ruthless Rhymes* of Harry Graham, the savage songs of British soldiers in the trenches, American jokes from the 1920's about lynching, and the American Horror Comics of the 50's, which were morbid in exactly the same way and popular long before Lord Giddens' meditations on global doom?

The joke was detailed in this book are a distinctively American phenomenon in which individuals who make jokes to which the members of a targeted group object are then made the subject of recrimination and harassment. In 1995, four Cornell freshmen sent out by e-mail "75 reasons why women should not have freedom of speech," which later escaped to wider dissemination on the internet. America's massed feminist harpies went berserk, the students were sent death threats, and attempts were made to get Cornell to discipline them. May a foreigner wonder why identity politics and the politics of emotion are so strong in the United States? Why does anger politics work so well in America? Or more to the point, why is some people's anger taken more seriously than others? Why is it "correct" to be indignant about jokes putting down homosexuals or blacks, whereas jokes about pedophile priests can circulate unmolested? What does this tell us about who really exercises power in America?

Let us look at two examples that Lewis provides. The first is an hilarious cartoon by Robert Crossman, published in 2005, called "Babe Lincoln," which followed the publication of a book suggesting that Abraham Lincoln was attracted to men and shared beds with them. The cartoon shows a large-breasted, wide-hipped Lincoln in women's clothing and top hat and beard, wielding an ax onstage, ready to split an imagined trunk into fence rails. The cartoon is a winner for its sheer incongruity. There were, however, immediate protests following its publication, saying that the cartoon confused homosexual men, transvestites, and transsexuals and was, thus, grossly insulting to the neatly business-suited, body-building "gay community." Yet it would not have surprised me at all to have seen a queer, bearded lumberjack in drag going down Main Street, California, on a float in a

gay-pride parade. *Quid rides?*

We may contrast this situation with the response to jokes about priests having sex with altar boys—jokes Lewis records as circulating among his students in the 1980's. Such jesting, if taken seriously, could be viewed as a malicious undermining of the moral authority of the priesthood and the meaning of the confessional. Only a small minority of priests are pedophiles, in exactly the same sense that only a small minority of black men are rapists. Liberals ought to argue that such jokes about priests are wrong because they unfairly indict an entire group. Why is it, then, that I cannot hear their protests? Lewis's take on this joke is an interesting one. He suggests that such humor could make the seduction of choirboys appear an ordinary, laughable, and—by implication—acceptable event, which could, in turn, make it easier for the hierarchy to tolerate and conceal priestly pedophilia.

These two radically different interpretations prove that jokes do not have clear meanings. They are meant to be ambiguous and incongruous; that is what makes them funny. This, in turn, undermines liberal claims that jokes influence people's opinions and dispositions. Lewis outlines at length the available research on this point, and it is clear to me, if not entirely to him, that there is very little support for the idea that jokes have any measurable effect on people's psyches.

At this point, Lewis, who is something of a liberal, suggests that jokes are a different kind of political snare, used to induce us to like and trust good-humored politicians such as Ronald Reagan; they are therefore a "distortion of and detraction from rational reflection." Maybe so, but is this not how all image politics, or indeed the "presentation of self," works? In his cozy fireside chats, Franklin Roosevelt lulled people into forgetting that he and his advisors (some of whom were, according to recently released KGB files, dangerous Soviet agents) were, against Churchill's better judgment, handing over Eastern Europe to communist slavery. FDR's carefully constructed geniality concealed a policy whose consequences were unspeakably cruel. Only under hard-joking Reagan was Eastern Europe freed, and only amiable George W. Bush has had the courage to denounce the blunders of the aging, ailing, possibly senile Roosevelt as "one of the greatest wrongs of history."

A sense of humor and an ability to use