

LAUGHTER AND THE BETWEEN: G. K. Chesterton and the Reconciliation of Theology and Hilarity

Duncan Bruce Reyburn

The secret of life lies in laughter and humility.

– G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*.²

I offer this book with the heartiest sentiments to all the jolly people who hate what I write, and regard it (very justly, for all I know), as a piece of poor clowning or a single tiresome joke. For if this book is a joke it is a joke against me. I am the man who with the utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before. If there is an element of farce in what follows, the farce is at my own expense; for this book explains how I fancied I was the first to set foot in Brighton and then found I was the last ... I did, like all other solemn little boys, try to be in advance of the age. Like them I tried to be some ten minutes in advance of the truth. And I found that I was eighteen hundred years behind it ... I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy.

– G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*.³

INTRODUCTION

Søren Kierkegaard tells a parable about a fire that breaks out backstage in a theatre. Seeing the untamable flames and the spreading destruction, a clown, already dressed up for his performance, steps out onto the stage

² Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, The Blatchford Controversies* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 107.

³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 213-214.

to warn the audience that their lives are in danger and to plead for help. Unfortunately, the onlookers regard the clown's pleas as nothing more than showmanship and they applaud him enthusiastically for his performance. As his pleas grow more desperate, the crowd laughs and responds with even greater applause. And so, as Kierkegaard concludes his tale, he writes, "I think the world will come to an end amid general applause from all the wits, who believe that it is a joke."⁴

It is not difficult to see why this story is usually interpreted in terms of soteriology: the burning theatre is analogous to a dying world, and the clown is analogous to the Christian church, which through her representatives is trying desperately to save it from destruction. It is difficult not to notice, though, in what way this analogy collapses: the church, both historically and at present, is hardly ever charged with clowning around. It is generally accused of many other things—irrelevance, naivety, mythologizing, moralizing, bigotry, and so on⁵—but generous and unnecessary frivolity is rarely one of them. This happens to be the "Lacanian lord of misrule,"⁶ Slavoj Žižek's biggest problem with so much of Christendom: it has 'somehow managed to miss the joke of Christianity.'⁷ While Žižek is not very clear on precisely what he means by the "joke of Christianity,"

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: The Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, edited by Charles E Moore, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 404. Joakim Garff points out that the basis of this story is factual: This exact sequence of events happened in St. Petersburg on February 14, 1836. By misunderstanding the clown, a number of people ended up losing their lives, in *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 774.

⁵ In *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993 [1925]), 256, Chesterton observes that such a vast array of (often contradictory) criticisms of Christianity exist that there must be something there (in Christianity) worth examining.

⁶ William Desmond, *The William Desmond Reader*, edited by Christopher Ben Simpson (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2012), 243.

⁷ Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and theology* (London: Continuum, 2008), 153.

his claim that Christianity and hilarity have often been taken to be at odds is not entirely without substance.

The earliest extra-biblical reference to jollity in Christian theology is found in one of Clement of Alexandria's (circa 150-215) letters.⁸ Although laughter, in his view, was a decidedly human phenomenon, he regarded it as permissible only in the rare cases when it was not irreverent or disrespectful. However, while including provisos concerning when laughter might be appropriate, he also did not support his readers' having a morose or severe countenance.⁹ Since he accounts for the various moods of man, his view of laughter may therefore be considered fairly balanced, although it is not without its problems. A less balanced view is found, however, in records on the Pachom monks of the fourth century, who were forbidden to joke and were severely punished if they laughed at prayer or meal times.¹⁰ Ammonius, a disciple of a particularly unhumorous Pachom monk and saint named Anthony, suggested that "[l]aughter is the beginning of the destruction of the soul" in that it "dispels virtues" and "pushes aside" all-important "thoughts on death and meditation on the punishment."¹¹ In a similar vein, Basil of Caesarea (circa. 329-379) held that the Christian "ought not to indulge in jesting; he ought not to laugh or even to suffer laughmakers."¹² For Basil, humor was the result of a "failure of self-mastery"—that is, it was taken

⁸ John Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria* (Farmington Hills: Twayne Publishers, 1973), 82; Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (London: Routledge), 173.

⁹ John Kaye, *Some Account of the Writings and Opinions of Clement of Alexandria* (London: J. G. & F. Rivington 1835), 77.

¹⁰ Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹² *Ibid.*

to be antithetical to the virtue of self-control that was deemed an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5.22).¹³

Later, at the turn of the fifth century, St. John Chrysostom, especially in his reading of the Gospel attributed to his namesake (John 16.20), painted a picture of Christ as somewhat dour-faced, although arguably, as in Clement's case, his problem was not with laughter per se, but with an excess of it, as well as with laughter that was out of keeping with a virtuous character.¹⁴ Still later, St. Benedict (480-543), in his famous *Rule*, presented the provocation of laughter as contrary to a holy life. This was typical of various monastic regulations, which considered laughter to be the grossest breach of the rule of silence, and was also something sometimes considered to make the mouth filthy.¹⁵ Another medieval monastic figure, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), echoed this icy stance toward laughter in her suggestion that it was a sin because it offered relief from the very labor that God had dished out as a punishment for defying him in Eden.¹⁶ This trend of finding Christianity against hilarity is, however, not restricted to medieval monastics. John Wesley, for example, spoke out against his brother-in-law because of his ability to "break a jest, and laugh at it heartily."¹⁷ John Calvin, too, was known for being particularly crabby: he certainly did not laugh easily, and if there is humor to be discerned in his work it is largely of the "mordant, 'pungent', 'biting' and 'cutting' variety."¹⁸ Here was a man who knew how to take the fun out of fundamentalism. Although, if you will forgive my flippant use of

¹³ Vassilis Saroglou, "Religion and Humor: An *a priori* Incompatibility?" in *Humor* 15, no. 2 (2002), 201.

¹⁴ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 67.

¹⁵ Stott, *Comedy*, 174.

¹⁶ Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 129.

¹⁷ Samuel Joekel, "Funny as hell: Christianity and humor reconsidered", in *Humor* 21, no. 4 (2008), 416.

¹⁸ Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 11.

theological caricature, perhaps humor and laughter are predestined for some and not for others.

In a similar vein, other examples of grave pietists and dreary theologians have also been cited by others to argue that so-called "Christians ideals" have been used on numerous occasions to bolster the cause of the hilarity-deficient, but it is important to recognize that this eschewal of laughter and the humorous is not entirely unique to Christian history. Rather, people of various cultures and traditions throughout history, even in the classical pagan world, have regarded laughter and humor as improper, especially since these were often taken to imply a lack of propriety and respect.¹⁹ It may therefore easily be argued that external (cultural), rather than internal (theological), factors were primarily responsible for having Christians miss of the so-called joke of Christianity, perhaps especially in their impression that Christ is more of a grim figure than a joyful one. It is often pointed out, for instance, that the Gospels show Jesus weeping but never laughing, indicating for some that he must have had no sense of humor—but the logic of such a conclusion is deeply flawed.²⁰ The gospels also never refer to Jesus urinating or humming to himself, but the absence of such references is not necessarily an indication that he did not do so. It is certainly possible that a *Zeitgeist* of seriousness could have resulted in this picture of an unsmiling and laughterless Jesus, as well as led to various intimations that Christianity ought to be humorless.

¹⁹ Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling and Cracking Up* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 1, 3, 112; Albrecht Classen, *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, edited by (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 18, 32, 69, 194, 293, 323, 494, 531.

²⁰ There are those, like Elton Trueblood, who have studied the humor in Jesus' teaching at great lengths. Trueblood indicates that while the Jesus of the New Testament is not described as laughing, he certainly cannot be said to lack a sense of humor, in *The Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

Still, the commonplace picture of a humorless Christianity is somewhat worsened by some fairly recent research in psychology done by Vassilis Saroglou, who demonstrates both argumentatively and empirically that religion and humor ought to be taken as possessing an *a priori* incompatibility. His study “from a personality psychology perspective” suggests that “religion associates negatively with personality traits, cognitive structures and social consequences typical of humor.”²¹ Saroglou is using the term *religion* rather than *Christianity*, but it is clear from the context of his study that Christianity is the religion most implicated by his research. He makes the claim that “it is possible that religious people may have a good sense of humor *despite* their religiosity,” but insists that we should not assume that their sense of humor is “*because* of it.”²² His confidence in his conclusion stems from his observation that religiosity predictably produces a number of qualities that result in a failure of a sense of humor: closed-mindedness, rigid dogmatism, intolerance, and a resistance to ambiguity. In Saroglou’s view, humor may be human, but it is certainly not divine, which also implies that it is therefore theologically unsupportable. Another researcher, David Feltmate, also rejects the congruency of humor and theology (albeit to a lesser degree than Saroglou) when he argues that the empirical should not give rise to the speculative. The appropriateness of such an injunction notwithstanding, his contention is that humor theory ought to be “ruthlessly materialistic” and therefore dismissive of any suggestion that the self is “porous” and thus “open to the supernatural.”²³

Now, as empirical as Saroglou’s and Feltmate’s research may be, it is also philosophically questionable, owing to its reliance upon a dubious

²¹ Saroglou, “Religion and Humor: An *a priori* Incompatibility?”, 205.

²² *Ibid.*, 206.

²³ David Feltmate, “The Sacred Comedy: The Problems and Possibilities of Peter Berger’s Theory of Humor”, in *Humor* 26, no. 4 (2013), 538-539.

presupposition. It is clearly true that a lot of religious people are closed-minded, rigidly dogmatic, intolerant, and resistant to ambiguity, but such descriptors could easily be applied to those who would regard themselves as non-religious, or even outright atheistic. The question, then, ought not to be whether Christians lack humor and therefore also the capacity to laugh, but whether it is possible to legitimate absolute humorlessness in theological terms. In other words, the central question is how Christianity, and its emphasis on "reconciliation of all things" to the Christ of faith (Colossians 1.15), may or may not be reconciled to humor and the laughter that results from an encounter with a good joke. To present an answer to this question, I turn to the work of G. K. Chesterton—a theologian who was forever laughing, joking, and defending the ephemeral. This was a man who had a remarkable "faculty of enjoying things" and whose "laugh was the loudest and most infectious of them all."²⁴ I want to explore here what it was in Chesterton's theology that allowed him to befriend and defend the jocular. My contention is simple: Chesterton's hilarity is perfectly congruent with his theology and is not just an anomaly owed to his temperament. To argue this, I put forward the claim that Chesterton's theology is distinctly paradoxical, and therefore open to the doubleness that humor is founded upon, and also that the centrality of the virtues of honesty, humility, and hospitality to his philosophy provide fertile soil for glee to grow. While I cannot here solve the question of whether Christian theology and humor are always reconcilable, tackling Chesterton's work may prove at least somewhat helpful for engaging with this much larger issue.

²⁴ Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 18.

I. CHESTERTON, HUMOR, AND WILLIAM DESMOND'S FOURFOLD SENSE OF BEING

Chesterton accedes, when it comes to matters of faith, that “far from it being irrelevant” to resort to silliness, it is in fact “the test of one’s seriousness.”²⁵ He claims that “[i]t is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.” If you can “take examples from pots and pans and boots and butter-tubs” then your theory, philosophy, or religion may have some genuine validity.²⁶ Here, Chesterton is not offering an oxymoronic logic that claims that the serious *is* silly, but is alluding instead to the fact that what matters is primarily one’s attitude toward reality, not just one’s opinion of it. By insisting that attitude forms the context for dogma, Chesterton’s theology exposes the wrongheadedness of a great many thinkers, Saroglou included, who have mistaken the content of belief for the container. For while the specifics of belief are not unimportant, what is primary is one’s posture toward reality; in fact, it is a particular posture toward reality that dogma serves. Dogma is made for reality, not the other way around. In Chesterton’s thinking, as also in Kierkegaard’s theology, the truth and the way to the truth are the same thing.²⁷ To disregard the way (understood as one’s posture or attitude toward reality) is tantamount to disregarding reality itself. What matters is not just a statement of belief, but the very syntax of that belief.²⁸

To explain this notion of how one’s stance can help, or perhaps even inhibit, one’s sense of humor, the philosophy of William Desmond is particularly

²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27, Illustrated London News 1905-1907* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 206.

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27*, 206.

²⁷ Christopher Ben Simpson, *The Truth is the Way: Kierkegaard’s Theologia Viatorum* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 5.

²⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 36, Illustrated London News 1932-1934* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 63.

instructive. It is through Desmond's lens of the "fourfold sense of being" that Chesterton's theology of humor is contemplated below. This fourfold, which is rooted in Aristotle's contention that "being may be said in many ways,"²⁹ may be offered as a way of grappling with our relationship with the multiple facets of reality. It traces the contours of various conditions of mindfulness before the world in a kind of phenomenology without phenomenological reduction and thus helps us to understand, in particular, the way that we figure and configure our language about things. This will obviously have a bearing on the way that language operates in various forms of the comical.

The first sense of being is the univocal sense, which "stresses the immediate [and arguably obvious] unity of being and thus prioritizes a simple sameness over multiplicity, mediation, and difference."³⁰ While the univocal is not untrue to being—after all, determination is essential for identifying and distinguishing the other senses of being—it is clearly resistant to humor in a few ways, and may therefore help to explain, at least partially, why certain theologians and theologies have tended toward solemnity. In particular, it resists complexity, especially with regard to the way that the same relates to the other. By seeking perfect coherence and consistency, and thus often tending toward literalism, it tends to flatten the possibility of surprise and consequently rests all too easily on unambiguous absolutes. Humor cannot thrive in a world perceived exclusively in terms of the univocal because humor is by nature the result of having incongruity answer to congruity, in a clash between the same and the other.

By stressing the (supposedly) unmediated same, the univocal tends to support a kind of monomania. In attempting to fix the truth determinately in rigid

²⁹ William Desmond, *Philosophy and its Others: Ways of Being and Mind* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 6.

³⁰ Christopher Ben Simpson. *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern: William Desmond and John D. Caputo* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 29.

thinking, playfulness is rejected out of hand. Somewhat unsurprisingly, just as laws against laughter will ultimately fail to prevent laughter (as many a serious monastic has discovered), the univocal cannot sustain itself. It is forever confronted with its own limitations, which undermine its absolute claims.³¹ It is probably for this reason that jokes are often on the univocally inclined: the confrontation with otherness at the center of humor is helpfully exaggerated by this self-limiting univocal solidity. Chesterton demonstrates this, for instance, when he offers that the “Morbid Logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious” and that “[t]he Determinist makes the theory of causation quite clear, and then finds that he cannot say ‘if you please’ to the housemaid.”³² It is not insignificant, as is made clearer below, that the fault lines in the univocal are unveiled so well by the presence of paradox.

While Christian theology certainly makes absolute claims, and thus includes the univocal as much as any other discourse, it is not properly understood as univocal and, at least in this regard, cannot be understood as contrary to humor and laughter. Reinhold Niebuhr, for one, points out that humor has a disarming quality that he intimates is in fact central to Christian theology: “The sense of humor is ... a byproduct of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humor do not take themselves” or their views “too seriously. They are able to ‘stand off’ from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions.”³³ Humor, in other words, requires what C. S.

³¹ William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), xiv-xv.

³² G. K. Chesterton, *G. K. Chesterton: Essential Writings*, edited by William Griffin (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 55.

³³ Reinhold Niebuhr. *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), 111-131.

Lewis calls "a taste for the other."³⁴ It requires a protagonistic shift, a decentering of self, that the univocal does not allow. Against this undiluted univocity, Chesterton is often toying with multiple perspectives. In fact, to survey his theology is to discover a complex picture of constant re-evaluations, reflections, and re-contextualizations. He warns us, after all, against the person who thinks only one thought—that is, the person whose perspective is rigid without any reason.³⁵ The person with only one thought stops all other thinking; in Chesterton's view, the thought that stops thought is the only thought that ought to be stopped.

Perhaps, then, humor and laughter would be more at home in the equivocal sense of being, which "stresses" an unmediated or even unmediatable "manyness over unity, difference over sameness, ambiguity over clarity."³⁶ In its obsession with an exaggerated and indeterminate sense of dispersion, disconnection, and difference, equivocity forces otherness to recede into unintelligibility. In the equivocal, the mind is divorced from being, and as a consequence a kind of hyper-subjectivity tends to take over, one that is highly uncertain of itself—if indeed it even allows for such a thing as a self—and yet, paradoxically, it is highly certain in this very hyper-subjectivity of its own uncertainties. In this, the same and the other remain permanently alienated from each other.

The equivocal sense is true to being in that it stresses the becoming of being—that is, it highlights the fact that being is a dance of impermanences and unquenchable dehiscences. But it fails to be true to being by insisting upon a somewhat absolutized fragmentation, and it shares in the conundrum of univocity by being self-subverting—beneath a sense of difference there is always a

³⁴ Gilbert Meilaender, *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978).

³⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 29, Illustrated London News 1911-1913* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 207-210.

³⁶ Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 29.

sense of the same. To those who say that “[t]here is not an abiding thing in what we know,” Chesterton responds that “it cannot be true that there is nothing abiding in what we know. For if that were so we should not know it at all and should not call it knowledge.”³⁷ He points out that “the fact of two things being different implies that they are similar. The hare and the tortoise may differ in the quality of swiftness, but they must agree in the quality of motion. The swiftest hare,” for instance, “cannot be swifter than an isosceles triangle or the idea of pinkness.”³⁸ Moreover, mediation is always involved, even when we perceive that a thing is beyond mediation. That we recognize its mysteriousness is precisely the result of being confronted with the limits of mediation. Desmond suggests that comedy is one articulation of the “fertile equivocality of human being,” although he also points out that the equivocal does not account completely for our laughter.³⁹ In non-sequiturs, such as the one offered by Chesterton on the swiftness of the hare, we especially have a sense of the equivocal, and yet our ability to get the joke rests on a mediation and a sense of solidity that is not accounted for by the equivocal. While the equivocal may try to suppress the determinable, the determinable always finds a way to break through.

For this reason, the modern dialectical sense of being may appear, at least at first, to be a better option for accounting and allowing for humor, since it is an attempt, as Hegel’s philosophy shows, to grapple honestly with the sameness presented by the univocal and the difference perceived by the equivocal. After all, as Lydia Amir observes, “humor is the result of a conflict between the self and an external object.”⁴⁰ Thus, the “humorist”—especially as one who accesses a

³⁷ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 78.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ William Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 116.

⁴⁰ Lydia B. Amir, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 212.

"sublime or contemplative mood"—will "[speak] the truth about himself in his relation to the other or the object."⁴¹ The dialectical sense ought to be able to accommodate humor and laughter better than the univocal and equivocal senses of being. Nevertheless, it is clear that it attempts to recover the univocal after equivocity and thus places the emphasis on the side of the same, at the expense of the other. The result is that even the different is perceived ultimately as being unified on the side of the familiar—that is, as something that can be synthesized into the same by self-mediation.

For the Hegelian dialectician, humor is a kind of inversion of the sublime—an experience, that is, of the infinite within the bounds of the finite.⁴² In accordance with the dialectical sense of being, laughter itself, far from being a "signal of transcendence" (to borrow Peter Berger's term),⁴³ is rooted in immanence and embodiedness, as if the joke is always intended to be an affirmation of one's material self. Hegel himself suggests that "[t]he general ground for comedy is ... a world in which man as subject or person has made himself completely master of everything that counts to himself."⁴⁴ The fact that the opposite is also easily arguable—namely, that laughter also propels us away from our self-enclosed intellectualizations—should alert us to the limitations of the Hegelian view. While it is not my aim here to discuss Hegel's philosophy of humor in any depth, I have mentioned the above to highlight how his dialectic, as a posture toward being, must ultimately undermine humor, even where it seems to accommodate otherness. By mediating the other into the same, it promotes, albeit unwittingly,

⁴¹ Ibid., 214.

⁴² Benjamin Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 217.

⁴³ Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Boston: Anchor Books, 1970).

⁴⁴ Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, 217.

the explaining of any joke. This inevitably results in the eradication of humor, or any possibility of laughter, even if humor and laughter were originally present.

This is precisely the problem highlighted by E. B. White when he notes that “[a]nalysts have had their go at humor, and I have read some of this interpretative literature, but without being greatly instructed. Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”⁴⁵ This is a problem often noted by humor theorists. When reflecting on Arthur Koestler’s theories on humor, David Nathan, for instance, has this to say: “Expert Schmexpert, he still tells the joke like no comedian would have done. If you want to know about comedy, go to the comics.”⁴⁶ “There is no mathematics or geometry of the comic,” Desmond writes; “When we thus determine the meaning of a joke, we kill it; spell out a joke and there is no laughter.”⁴⁷

“Laughter,” Desmond contends, “is ultimately grounded in the generous agape [ἀγάπη] of being, though most of it takes shape in the equivocal.”⁴⁸ For Desmond, this ἀγάπη as the recovery of the equivocal after dialectic reflects a particular type of mindfulness that takes heed of the other senses of being, but resists any attempt to control being through self-mediation, since being is ultimately not a mere intellectual exercise. Being, as D. C. Schindler observes, is “everything ... *and more*.”⁴⁹ It presents itself always as excessive, inexhaustible, and

⁴⁵ White, E.B. & White, K.S. *A Subtreasury of American Humor*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1941), xvii.

⁴⁶ David Nathan, *The Laughtermakers: A Quest for Comedy* (London: Peter Owen, 1971), 13. It is, however, a mistake to assume that the analysis of humor should necessarily be funny. The analysis of anything is never the same as the thing analyzed, even when it is a suitable reflection of the truths revealed by what is being analyzed.

⁴⁷ Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 116.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ D. C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 4.

overdetermined. Thus, Desmond offers what he calls the *metaxological* stance toward being. Metaxology, as a discourse (λόγος) of the between (μεταξύ), affirms our being as between-being. The metaxological, as an "intermediation between beings who are open wholes until themselves, without being completely determined by themselves,"⁵⁰ "is the truth of the univocal, equivocal, and the dialectical. When we try to articulate it, we are trying to find the right words for what is given in the overdeterminacy of ... original astonishment."⁵¹

The metaxological affirms our between-being, which is precisely what Chesterton does when he notes that humor rests on an understanding of the "Dual Nature of Man"; the "primary paradox" is that "man is superior to all the things around him and yet is at their mercy."⁵² Man has a kind of "spiritual immensity within" that is always co-inherent with his "littleness and restriction without."⁵³ This fact reads as a joke, "for it is itself a joke that a house should be larger inside than out."⁵⁴ Elsewhere, Chesterton writes that "Man himself is a joke in the sense of a paradox. That there is something very extraordinary about his position, and therefore presumably about his past, is the clearest sort of common sense. Alone of all creatures he is not self-sufficient, even while he is supreme." The human being, Chesterton says,

⁵⁰ Desmond, *William Desmond Reader*, 38.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵² G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28, Illustrated London News 1908-1910* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 66. In Milbank's assessment of Chesterton, he equates the metaxological with Chestertonian paradox, in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, edited by Creston Davis (Boston: MIT Press, 2009). John D. Caputo seems skeptical of this equation of the metaxological with the paradoxical but I nonetheless think that Milbank's assessment is fitting, especially when taken in the context of the aim of Chesterton's paradox and Desmond's metaxology, which is, if a generalization may be allowed, to recover a sense of astonishment within our concrete experience of the world.

⁵³ G. K. Chesterton, "Humour: Encyclopedia Britannica," 1928. <http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/Humour.html>. Retrieved 10.11.2014.

⁵⁴ Chesterton, "Humour: Encyclopedia Britannica".

dare not sleep in his own skin; he cannot simply put his own food into his own stomach. He has to put the latter first into an oven and cover the former first with external and foreign hair; always sleeping in somebody else's skin. In one sense he is a cripple amongst the creatures; he is at once imperfect and artificial like a monster with two glass eyes and two wooden legs. He is propped upon crutches that are called furniture; he is patched and protected with bandages that are called clothes. Properly visualized, he is grotesque, not when he sits on a hat, but when he allows a hat to sit on him. Properly understood, he is not so ridiculous when he sits on a hat as when he sits on a chair; for then he is acting like some monstrous sort of crippled quadruped and equipping himself with four wooden legs. Why the lord of creation is a cripple in this queer sense is an open question; but some maintain that it is because he once had a bad fall.⁵⁵

Chesterton echoes these thoughts in his book *The Everlasting Man*:

The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations ... Alone among the animals he feels the need of averting his thought from the root realities of his own bodily being; of hiding them as in the presence of some higher possibility which creates the mystery of shame.⁵⁶

Chesterton articulates man's between-being by highlighting two aspects of our experience of the between. The first follows Plato's understanding of man: he

⁵⁵ Chesterton, "The Anatomy of the Joke," 1922.

http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/Man_Orthodox.html. Retrieved 10.11.2014

⁵⁶ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993 [1925]), 36.

is somehow both an animal and yet also godlike.⁵⁷ This is why, for Chesterton, "the process which ends in a joke necessarily begins with a certain idea of dignity."⁵⁸ This sense of "dignity is in some way implied beforehand."⁵⁹ Chesterton argues that there are things that require no previous experience and yet can still "break on a person"—things like beauty or knowledge—but "incongruity cannot break on him without the pre-existence or pre-supposition of something with which it fails to be congruous."⁶⁰ The second aspect of the human experience of being between involves a sense of being fallen, which is indicated by "the mystery of shame." We, as the "image of God," are caught between what we experience ourselves to be and what we hope ourselves to be.⁶¹ The idea is expressed in the paradox that whatever we are, we are not ourselves. Our ideals are constantly being undermined by the brute facts of our material reality. This second experience of the between involves a strong sense of the corruption of the ethical. It is in the experience of these two betweenings that humor originates. Thus, Chesterton contends that "[w]hatever is cosmic is comic" and also that "all grotesqueness is itself ultimately related to seriousness. Unless a thing is dignified, it cannot be undignified":⁶²

Why is it funny that a man should sit down suddenly in the street? There is only one possible or intelligent reason: that a man is the image of God. It is not funny that anything else should fall down; only that a man should fall down. No one sees anything funny in a tree falling down. No one sees a delicate absurdity in a stone falling down. No man stops in the road and roars with laughter at the sight of snow coming down. The fall of thunderbolts is treated with some gravity. The fall of roofs and high buildings is taken

⁵⁷ William Desmond, *Art, Origins, Otherness: Between Philosophy and Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 195.

⁵⁸ Chesterton, "The Anatomy of the Joke."

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27*, 205-206.

seriously. It is only when a man tumbles down that we laugh. Why do we laugh? Because it is a grave religious matter: it is the Fall of Man. Only man can be absurd: for only man can be dignified.⁶³

In the above, Chesterton deals with the first sense of our between-being: namely, the experience of having our expectations thwarted by our actions. Nevertheless, in pointing out that there is humor in this, he does not neglect the second sense of our between-being: namely, the disjunction between the ideal state of being and the corruption of that ideal, which is still inevitably a sign—perhaps even a sacrament—of the first sense of our between-being. He goes so far as to say that even vulgar jokes point to the sublime. He suggests that “once you have got hold of a vulgar joke you may be certain that you have got hold of a subtle and spiritual idea.”⁶⁴ Those who make vulgar jokes do so because they have observed “something deep” that “they could not express except by something silly and emphatic.”⁶⁵ They have seen “something delicate which they could only express by something indelicate.”⁶⁶ The ground of being and meaning speaks with a fair degree of lucidity even in being contradicted by nonsense.

Chesterton regards this sense of being between as distinctly human, which is why he points out that the human being is “[a]lone among the animals” in being “shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself.”⁶⁷ It is only man who is caught in this awareness—this perplexing, curious astonishment—of his own sense of being between. Of course, we do laugh at animals, but they never share in the joke, because they do not have this same

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 66.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 36.

sense of being between; we laugh at the laughter of the hyena or the “fantastic shapes of the other animals” only because they are “mirrored in the mind of man.”⁶⁸ They become extensions of our own self-understanding. Even the “camel’s hump and the rhinoceros’ horn are human secrets and even human possessions.”⁶⁹ We definitely “know the pelican and the penguin better than they know themselves.”⁷⁰ As the world reflects us and as we reflect the world, we are made even more aware of our being as being between. And as we are made more aware of our being between we are opened up more fully to both the profound and the ridiculous.

Chesterton argues that we too easily lose this sense of the between, and thus need a philosophy or theology that helps us to retain it. He explains this need by means of a joke, thereby implying that it is philosophy or theology that upholds our sense of the between that will help us to retain our sense of humor. He writes, “I have often had a fancy for writing a romance about an English yachtsman who slightly miscalculated his course and discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas.”⁷¹ The same logic of this joke is followed by Chesterton’s friend J.B. Morton, in his story about a reputable rocket scientist, “Dr. Strabismus (Whom God Preserve) of Utrecht,” who sets off amidst ridiculous fanfare to be the first man to land on the moon. Alas, “Dr. Strabismus (Whom God Preserve) of Utrecht,” is high on ambition but low on skill; thus he and his crew end up landing in Worthing (while thinking, in deeply academic seriousness, that it is the moon).⁷² The strange joke-logic followed by both Chesterton and Morton is used by Chesterton to set up the question that guides his first in-depth exploration of Christianity in a book,

⁶⁸ Chesterton, “The Anatomy of the Joke.”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 211.

⁷² J. B. Morton, *The Misadventures of Dr. Strabismus* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1949), 1-17.

Orthodoxy (1908): “What could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again? ... What could be more glorious than to brace one’s self up to discover New South Wales and then realize, with a gush of happy tears that it was really old South Wales?”⁷³

For Chesterton, these questions bring to mind what he calls the “main problem for philosophers,” which can be expressed in a simple question: “How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it? How can this queer cosmic town, with its many-legged citizens, with its monstrous and ancient lamps, how can this world give us at once the fascination of a strange town and the comfort and honour of being our own town?”⁷⁴ How, in other words, can we have a sense of the same (the self, the familiar) *and* the other (that which confronts the self, the strange) without sacrificing either in the totalizing acceptance of non-mediation in univocity or equivocity, or even in the distorting, self-serving mediation of dialectic?

In Chesterton’s mind, it is precisely a Christian (that is, Catholic) theology that presents us with a “philosophy” that best supports our being between as the best expression of our actual experience of the world and as the best account of mediation. It echoes what Christopher Ben Simpson calls a *theologia viatorum* that is forever “between a *theologia nomdicum* and a *theologia beatorum*,”⁷⁵ as well as John Milbank’s insistence, borrowed from Chesterton, that the desire at the core of human nature involves wanting to be at home, and thus to have a sense of wholeness, and wanting to be abroad, and thus to have a sense of the

⁷³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 212.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Simpson, *The Truth is the Way*, 5.

infinite.⁷⁶ It is the very theology that allows for the yearning at the core of our being that is, as Desmond explains, both a "horizontal exigence for wholeness" and a "vertical openness through otherness to what is ultimate."⁷⁷

This double-posture of belonging and longing, I believe, is a significant starting point for answering the question of what it is in Chesterton's theology that allows him to retain his sense of humor and laugh so heartily, although it may not necessarily provide an absolutely comprehensive explanation for how theology and humor may be reconciled. Obviously, as Conrad Hyers has noticed, in the Bible, as in comedy, things are turned on their heads in a perpetually startling display of paradoxical confrontations; for example, self-importance is thrown down and poverty is raised to the stature of wealth.⁷⁸ Still, it is not enough simply to say that "Christianity appeals to paradox" and therefore supports humor, even if such a claim aligns so well with the incongruity theory that remains at the center of humor research, with its strong references to "contradiction" and "discrepancies."⁷⁹ After all, as already intimated by the examples referred to above, one does not have to look far before one finds an overly stern theologian who expresses nothing but a noble and solemn adherence to the paradoxes of Christianity.

Chesterton provides an interesting remedy to this problem by pointing out that it is possible to "have absorbed the paradox" and have therefore also "lost the point."⁸⁰ It is possible, in Chesterton's mind, to hold to a paradox in such a way as to fail to "see the joke"—that is, to hold to a paradox without seeing it as a

⁷⁶ John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 210.

⁷⁷ William Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness: An Essay on Origins*, (Wipf & Stock, 2013, second edition), 17.

⁷⁸ Joekel, "Funny as hell: Christianity and humor reconsidered," 421.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 37, Illustrated London News 1935-1936* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 75.

paradox.⁸¹ The whole purpose of paradox, as an extension of analogy's insistence upon comparison, is to set up the shock of contradiction, since "putting things side by side is a necessary preliminary to having them clash."⁸² But to have its fullest force, paradox needs to be taken, as in the case of the doctrine of analogy, as that which by rhetorical force can propel the paradoxologist into the metaphysical truth that is found beyond the bounds of linguistic expression. To use Chesterton's words, one might say that paradox is "stereoscopic," in that it gives a person the opportunity to see rather than merely absorb and synthesize two different pictures, and yet be able to see "all the better for that."⁸³

The entire purpose of paradox is not in its verbal construction, taken wholesale as a clever proposition, but to let things be themselves, to indicate toward the sheer quiddity of things. This is to say that it exists to, as Chesterton says, let red be red and white be white, without their being mixed to form the disgustingly anaemic mixture that is the color pink.⁸⁴ Paradox should always be held in such a way as to be "suggestive" and "fruitful" rather than "barren" or "abortive."⁸⁵ It should, by grappling with the sheer intractability of being, overcome "mental inertia" by retaining an openness to otherness and that which is beyond otherness without overemphasizing the two extremes of alienation or complacency.⁸⁶ The question of how this is done thus becomes important. Paradox, as a metaxology or wording of the between, ought to be held in a particular way. To borrow from Milbank, it is not that "impossible contradiction" must be overcome through dialectics in the end, but rather that "an outright

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Hugh Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 25.

⁸³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 230.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 29*, 53.

⁸⁶ Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton*, 17-18.

impossible *coincidence of opposites* ... can (somehow, but we know not how) be persisted with."⁸⁷ There is something irreducible in being, something revealed by the joke, that ought to be recognized in its very irreducibility.

2. HONESTY, HUMILITY, AND HOSPITALITY

In Chesterton's mind, there are certain primary values according to which an authentic Christian theology operates, and as it turns out, these happen to be the very conditions within which humor itself can operate. They are honesty (implying "perfect sincerity"), humility (implying a healthy "absence of self-esteem" and even worship), and hospitality (implying "boundless good temper," flexibility, generosity, and gratitude).⁸⁸ It turns out that the enemies of these qualities are also the enemies of humor: pride,⁸⁹ complacency,⁹⁰ dishonesty,⁹¹ irreligiousness, and idolatry.⁹² Other enemies of humor—a lack of playfulness, literal-mindedness, authoritarianism, and a lack of courageous risk-taking—are more easily recognized when honesty, humility, and hospitality are taken to be primary values.

On the first of these values, Chesterton observes that many people seem "to assume that the unscrupulous parts of newspaper-writing will be the frivolous or jocular parts" but suggests that this "is against all ethical experience," for "[j]okes

⁸⁷ John Milbank, "The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek" in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*, edited by Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 163.

⁸⁸ Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 110.

⁸⁹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 107.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁹¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27*, 206.

⁹² G. K. Chesterton, "On Seriousness", 1920, http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/The_Uses_of_Diversity.html#seriousness. Retrieved 10.11.2014.

are generally honest.”⁹³ “Complete solemnity,” on the other hand, “is almost always dishonest.”⁹⁴ Solemnity, in Chesterton’s mind, is a way of distorting the truth of things, and especially our relationship with—that is, our posture toward—that truth. He argues that “balance” is lost when people are “being pelted with little pieces of alleged fact” that construct a picture “made up entirely of exceptions.”⁹⁵ Journalism, for Chesterton, provides many examples of such a distortion of reality, for we will learn that “Lord Jones is dead” even if we never knew that he was alive to begin with.⁹⁶ Whereas “[t]he writer of a ‘snippet’ of news can refer to ‘a fugitive and frivolous fact in a fugitive and frivolous way,’” the “writer of the leading article has to write about a fact that he has known for twenty minutes as if it were a fact that he has studied for twenty years.”⁹⁷

Seriousness, in Chesterton’s view, is far more likely to create a damaging divorce of humor and religion; indeed, he contends that seriousness is the “fashion of all false religions. The man who takes everything seriously is the man who makes an idol of everything: he bows down to wood and stone until his limbs are as rooted as the roots of the tree or his head as fallen as the stone sunken by the roadside.”⁹⁸ “Honesty,” on the contrary, “is never solemn; it is only hypocrisy that can be that. Honesty always laughs because things are so laughable.”⁹⁹ An example from Chesterton’s own life illustrates the hilarity of honesty, especially in its desire to put things properly into context. He writes:

⁹³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27*, 95.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 33*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 95.

⁹⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *The Penguin Complete Father Brown* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 246.

⁹⁷ G. K. Chesterton, “On Seriousness.”

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Apostle and the Wild Ducks* (London: Paul Elek, 1975), 136.

The other day, I was nearly arrested by two excited policemen in a wood in Yorkshire. I was on holiday and was engaged in that rich and intricate mass of pleasures, duties, and discoveries which for the keeping of the profane, we disguise by the exoteric name of Nothing. At the moment in question I was throwing a big Swedish knife at a tree, practising (alas, without success) that useful trick of knife-throwing by which men murder each other in Stevenson's romances.¹⁰⁰

Chesterton explains that at this point he was accosted by two policemen who accused him of damaging the tree. Chesterton, in earnest, points out that this was not true because he 'could not hit' the tree.¹⁰¹ Here, then, it is precisely in his honesty that we find him at odds with his own ideal. The surprise of any joke, after all, is not found predominantly in the contradiction of reality, but in the subversion of our configurations of reality; it challenges what has been taken for granted as truth in order to allow for the possibility of a more authentic encounter with truth.

For Chesterton, such an encounter with and admission of truth requires humility—even the humility that recognizes the limits of our ability to recognize the truth, or the limitations of reason to account for human experience.¹⁰² Chesterton suggests that "being undignified is the essence of all real happiness, whether before God or man. Hilarity involves humility; nay, it involves humiliation."¹⁰³ Even the idea of being made to laugh "contains the idea of a certain coercion' that confronts us with a kind of 'furious self-effacement."¹⁰⁴ This self-effacement in the face of a joke is reflective of the great reversal that is at the center of Christian teaching, which is indicated by the words of Jesus: "Blessed

¹⁰⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Dover, 2007), 138.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume XXXVI: Illustrated London News 1932-1934*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 60.

¹⁰³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 24.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 459.

are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5.3) and “The last shall be first” (Matthew 20.16). Chesterton’s own reading of one of the Beatitudes follows this same logic: “Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall be gloriously surprised ... Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall possess the cities and the mountains; blessed is the meek, for he shall inherit the earth.”¹⁰⁵ It is possibly this kind of reversal that Chesterton has in mind when he notes that “[r]eligion is much nearer to riotous happiness than it is to the detached and temperate types of happiness in which gentlemen and philosophers find their peace.”¹⁰⁶ He suggests that “[r]iot means being a rotter; and religion means knowing you are a rotter.”¹⁰⁷ A state of fallenness makes hardly a dent in the realization of the Kingdom of Heaven; rather, it is in the vulnerability of humor—in this recognition of the twin possibilities of ‘lightness of heart’ and of the “hurt” in the fact of corrupted ideals—that the Kingdom is more readily recognized.¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, there are times, Chesterton suggests, “when we are almost crushed, not so much with the load of the evil as with the load of the goodness of humanity, when we feel that we are nothing but the inheritors of a humiliating splendor.”¹⁰⁹ The idea of regarding humility as the ground for humor stems from Chesterton’s conviction that “it is always the secure who are humble.”¹¹⁰ The secure are even humble enough to laugh at their own jokes, for “[i]f a man may not laugh at his own jokes, at whose jokes may he laugh? May not an architect pray in his own cathedral? May he not (if he is any artist worth speaking of) be

¹⁰⁵ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 69.

¹⁰⁶ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 24.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰⁹ Chesterton, *The Defendant*, (Wildside Press, 2005), 41.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

afraid of his own cathedral?"¹¹¹ In Chesterton's view, hilarity follows humility because humility is a sign of security: "This combination of joy and self-prostration is a great deal too universal to be ignored."¹¹² In fact, "[i]f humility" is ever "discredited as a virtue" it would be because of a "collapse of joy."¹¹³ Chesterton observes that pessimism and bitterness tend to go hand-in-hand with "self-assertion."¹¹⁴ Thus, for him, pride does not go before a fall, but is the fall.

Two ideas are raised in this homage to humility. One of the oldest of the theories of humor is known as superiority theory, which suggests that laughter is the result of a subjective sense of one's superiority over a thing or person or people group. This offers, in my view, a purely dialectical and therefore overly universal or impersonal reading of humor, in that it suggests that all humor concerns the mediation of the other into the same. While there may be some truth to this theory, it is terribly self-limiting. Against this, Chesterton's understanding of humor, as a subjective experience, stresses that the primary source of our laughter is our submission to the specifics of the joke before us. This is to stress again that our sense of the humorous is rooted in a genuine confrontation with otherness, in its uniqueness, and our consequent obedience to the quiddity of that otherness. Chesterton's linking of humility and hilarity fits with an obvious and certainly quite universal fact about human nature: people will joke and laugh more easily when they feel safe. Although laughter and joking can take place in stressful circumstances, even the function of this use of humor is generally to provide comic relief—that is, a sense of safety even within difficult or perilous circumstances.

¹¹¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27*, 95

¹¹² Chesterton, *The Defendant*, 81.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Humor, as St. Thomas Aquinas suggests, provides “playful relaxation”—something only possible in serene circumstances.¹¹⁵ This understanding of humor as arising from a sense of stability complies nicely with Thomas Veatch’s theory of humor, which stipulates that one of the “conditions for the perception of humor” is a combination of the perception of a “violation of some subjective principle” with a definite sense that “the situation” is actually “normal.”¹¹⁶ Additionally, Peter McGraw’s “benign violation theory,” which builds on Veatch’s theory, is rooted in this same perception of security; a joke is only received as a joke in something unsettling or threatening if the source of the instability or threat is perceived to be benign.¹¹⁷

It is in this connection of humility to security that Chesterton is able to sustain the view that humor and seriousness are not ultimately antithetical but are instead intimate partners. Even in his reading of *The Book of Job*—a deeply serious book about the agonies of human experience—he therefore discovers a God who winks and laughs.¹¹⁸ That a great deal of Christian theology remains seriousness is not to say that it is opposed to joy. Even if “Catholic doctrine and discipline” are perceived as providing stubbornly serious walls, “they are the walls of a playground” within which hilarity can run riot.¹¹⁹ Chesterton contends that Christianity provides the “frame” that has “preserved [even] the pleasure of Paganism.”¹²⁰ This view challenges the sustainability of Žižek’s complaint about the lack of humor in Christianity, and perhaps even my own quip above about the lack of humor in John Calvin. Just as the fact that we do not have direct

¹¹⁵ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), unpaginated e-book.

¹¹⁶ Thomas C. Veatch, “A theory of Humor,” in *Humor* 11, no. 2 (1998), 161-215.

¹¹⁷ Peter McGraw & Joel Warner, *The Humor Code*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 10.

¹¹⁸ See G. K. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 91-102.

¹¹⁹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume I*, 350.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

evidence that Jesus laughed is not enough to make the claim that he or his followers are forbidden to laugh, perhaps it is precisely because of serious theology that genuine laughter may be possible. Perhaps those who laugh do not laugh because they have not been serious enough.

This view of laughter and humility as related to security also has something to say about the way we relate to community. Chesterton notices that a "joke falls flat" when a person is confined to a kind of "insane individualism" that pride establishes.¹²¹ The purpose of a joke is to be "good enough for ... company."¹²² To be in on a joke, one has to be in favor of the "uproariously communal."¹²³ Levities cannot be secrets, but are always in-jokes for those privy to the camaraderie of humor and laughter.¹²⁴ Consequently, for Chesterton, humor, together with being rooted in honesty and humility, is always reliant upon an attitude of hospitality. One has to be on the side of the joker—empathetic with his stance toward reality—in order to see "what he is making fun of."¹²⁵ A "good man ought to love nonsense," although this ought not to be at the expense of sense.¹²⁶ Even if it sounds like a contradiction in terms, this appreciation even of the alien in the comical is ultimately reflective of an appreciation of a sense of belonging, of having a home. Thus, Chesterton suggests that "[c]entripetal people are jolly" while "[c]entrifugal people are a bore."¹²⁷ It is those who have a sense of the center, who are honest and humble before genuine otherness while also retaining a strong sense of their own being-at-home, who have the greatest capacity for delighting in the delightful.

¹²¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 32.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 33*, 536-537.

¹²⁶ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 324

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 355.

This raises the question of what the center of Chesterton's theology is. What is the primary springboard for his jollity? Chesterton's fundamental image for one who genuinely revels in between-being is the image of a child. When he writes of a theology that seeks astonishment, he explains that the thing he means "can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, ... they want things repeated and unchanged":¹²⁸

They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.¹²⁹

This becomes a resounding theme throughout Chesterton's body of writing, this intense need to return to the familiar as if it were new. His theology may therefore be understood, in essence, as a reflection of the Christian hope for a renewal of all things (Revelation 21.5). Just one of many examples of this can be found in Chesterton's essay *The Riddle of the Ivy*:

More than a month ago, when I was leaving London for a holiday, a friend walked into my flat in Battersea and found me surrounded with half-packed luggage.

'You seem to be off on your travels,' he said. 'Where are you going?'

With a strap between my teeth I replied, 'To Battersea.'

¹²⁸ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 263.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 263-264.

'The wit of your remark,' he said, 'wholly escapes me.'

'I am going to Battersea,' I repeated, 'to Battersea via Paris, Belfort, Heidelberg, and Frankfort. My remark contained no wit. It contained simply the truth. I am going to wander over the world until once more I find Battersea. Somewhere in the seas of sunset or of sunrise, somewhere in the ultimate archipelago of the earth, there is one little island that I wish to find: an island with low green hills and great white cliffs. Travellers tell me that it is called England (Scotch travellers tell me that it is called Britain), and there is a rumour that somewhere in the heart of it there is a beautiful place called Battersea.'

'I suppose it is unnecessary to tell you,' said my friend, with an air of intellectual comparison, 'that this is Battersea?'

'It is quite unnecessary,' I said, 'and it is spiritually untrue. I cannot see any Battersea here; I cannot see any London or any England. I cannot see that door. I cannot see that chair: because a cloud of sleep and custom has come across my eyes. The only way to get back to them is to go somewhere else; and that is the real object of travel and the real pleasure of holidays. Do you suppose that I go to France in order to see France? Do you suppose that I go to see Germany in order to see Germany? I shall enjoy them both; but it is not them that I am seeking. I am seeking Battersea'.¹³⁰

Here, Chesterton claims that he is *going* to *where he is*, which implies, quite rightly, that he is somehow *distant* from where he *is present*. The paradox here, even in its syntax of intimacy, exaggerates distance; to leave is to properly understand, as if for the first time, what it is to arrive at the very place one is leaving from. This is what Milbank points out in his discussion of paradox as a "misty conceit."¹³¹ Paradox brings near what is distant, and creates a space between what is near, thus revealing that there is nearness *in* distance, and vice versa. This reclaiming of the distance in nearness, and vice versa, mirrors Chesterton's ongoing desire to return to a state of sinless innocence, to have his

¹³⁰ Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, 162-163.

¹³¹ Milbank, "The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics," 160-176

perspective repeatedly renewed.¹³² In short, Chesterton's theological project hinges around not just the possibility but the reality of things made new, recovered, and reconciled.¹³³ Using a frivolous example, he says that "[i]f you do not think it extraordinary that a pumpkin is always a pumpkin, think again. You have not yet even begun a philosophy. You have not even seen a pumpkin."¹³⁴ Again, the problem at the center of our human experience—a problem that eradicates one's sense of connection to God, his world and other human beings, as well as one's sense of humor—is the problem of pride. In Chesterton's view, "all evil began with some attempt at superiority."¹³⁵ In the final analysis, for him, Christianity presents an opportunity to regain a healthy perspective by reclaiming a perspective of the world untainted by pride. Although various literary devices are used to reflect this concern—including the use of defamiliarization and humor—Chesterton's central image for this renewal of

¹³² This theme of recovering the new is ongoing in Chesterton's work. I offer three examples of this here. The first is Chesterton's story about a bored boy's encounter with a stranger who insists that the boy try on a range of colored spectacles, thereby converting the world into a green world, then a blue world, then a red world, and, finally, a yellow world. At the end of this visual experiment, the boy is confronted again with the world that he actually lives in and is astonished to find its vivid and various colors staring back at him. The boy sees the world "with new eyes." In *The Coloured Lands* (London: Dover, 2009 [1938]), 17-49. Then, in a novel, Chesterton sets up a series of strange but benevolent ruses, conducted by the so-called Club of Queer Trades, to force people to confront their worlds with replenished astonishment, in *The Club of Queer Trades* (London: Hesperus, 2007 [1905]). In another novel, Chesterton tells the story of a man named Innocent Smith, who goes to tremendous and sometimes perplexing lengths to, as Alison Milbank suggests, "receive his own life back as a present," in *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 122; Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Manalive* (Mineola: Dover, 2000 [1912]). For Chesterton, "The prime function of the imagination is to see our whole orderly system as a pile of stratified revolutions. In spite of all revolutionaries it must be said that the function of the imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange; not so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders," in *The Defendant*, 53.

¹³³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 313.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 387-388

¹³⁵ Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, 341.

perspective is found in the practice of confession, the act of owning up to one's own faults by opening one's self up to the Divine. He suggests that

when a Catholic comes from Confession, he does truly, by definition, step out again into that dawn of his own beginning and look with new eyes across the world He believes that in that dim corner, and in that brief ritual, God has really remade him in His own image. He is now a new experiment of the Creator. He is as much a new experiment as he was when he was really only five years old. He stands, as I said, in the white light at the worthy beginning of the life of a man. The accumulations of time can no longer terrify. He may be grey and gouty; but he is only five minutes old.

I noted above that there is no shortage of humorlessness in church history, and it is therefore somewhat understandable that people like Žižek and Saroglou, among others, would suggest that humorlessness is a problem faced particularly by the religiously inclined. However, such a view of history is too limiting to convincingly argue that Christianity and hilarity cannot be reconciled. Indeed, a closer look reveals that Christianity and hilarity may be reconciled, not in spite of Christian theology, but strictly because of it. Even Žižek agrees that quite a number of theologians do seem to see what he calls the "joke of Christianity," including Luther, Chesterton, and Kierkegaard—thinkers whose fidelity to paradox is obvious. Still, Chesterton's response to the critique that implies that Christians lack humor would probably be the same as the response he offered to Robert Blatchford when he criticized Christians for being capable of evil. Chesterton suggests that the problem is not that Christians are bad, but that "human beings" in general "are bad" despite claiming to be "so good."¹³⁶ Where there is humorlessness in Christians, it may simply be a problem of personality or circumstance, but it is not, in Chesterton's theology, a problem relating to what Christianity itself advocates, for "Christianity is itself so a jolly thing that it

¹³⁶ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 391.

fills the possessor of it with a certain silly exuberance, which sad and high-minded Rationalists might reasonably mistake for mere buffoonery and blasphemy.”¹³⁷ In fact, it is because of its emphasis on holding paradox carefully, as a conversation between the same and the different, and its valuing of honesty, humility, and hospitality, that Christianity and hilarity are easily reconciled, even if the Gospel narratives do not depict a laughing Christ. Therefore, Chesterton, who begins his book *Orthodoxy* with a question of how we might reconcile our desire for a sense of being at home with our desire for adventure, is able to conclude with a reverie on the hidden laughter of Christ:

Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian. And as I open again the strange small book from which all Christianity came; and I am again haunted by a kind of confirmation. The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of hell. Yet He restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth, and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Ibid., 374.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 365-366.