

Humor in Church

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Abstract

The Church has a reputation for seriousness but there has been a growing sense over these years that Christianity stands for a holistic view of life—and this includes humor. *How* to include humor in Sunday worship has been an interesting question. This article offers examples of humor from my career as a minister. They suggest that, in moderation, humor has an important place in church life and in a holistic vision of life in general.

Key words: Children’s Address, April Fool, Christmas, “Laughing Jesus”, pandemic.

From 1972 to 2013 I served as a United Reformed Church minister in England, first in Birmingham, then Sheffield and finally in Plymouth. The Church has a reputation for seriousness but there has been a growing sense over these years that Christianity stands for a holistic view of life—and this includes humor. *How* to include humor in Sunday worship has been an interesting question¹.

1. Children’s Addresses

When I was training for the ministry a fellow-student floated the theory that one could take any story whatsoever and turn it into a Children’s Address by adding the sentence “Life is like that, children”! The Children’s Address does what it says on the tin and tries to engage the younger generation, often by referring to pop music or football teams—and by seeking to be humorous. Older members of the congregation like it a lot!

When ‘preaching with a view’ (i.e., seeking the post of minister in that church) I used a shaggy-dog story about a rice krispie. When the newly-made rice krispies came out of the machine in the factory and were put into a packet, our rice krispie found himself at the bottom of the packet. “Never mind, he said, I’m a brave, clever little rice krispie I am. I’ll push and I’ll

¹ I would like to thank Christine A. James for her helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper and for drawing my attention to relevant bibliography that may strengthen my argument.

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pull and I'll push and I'll pull, and I'll get to the top of the packet". So he pushed and he pulled, he pushed and he pulled, and he got to the top of the packet. *Unfortunately*, as his packet was placed with other packets in a big box for transfer it was turned upside down and our rice krispie found himself at the bottom once again. "Never mind, he said, I'm a brave, clever little rice krispie, I am...." And so the story is dragged out for another half a dozen stages of his passage from factory to shop to breakfast table. With mounting expectation we hear what must surely be the final "Never mind, he said..." when the preacher suddenly cuts in to the narrative and says: "...And I'll tell you the rest next week, because it's a serial (cereal) story".

"Life is like that, children". It does not come all at once but in episodes over time—which each require us to be brave, clever little rice krispies ourselves. The Church also gives us the story of Jesus in weekly episodes and encourages us to reflect his serial story in the serial story of our own lives. Suffice it to say that I used this story when 'preaching with a view' at each of my three churches—and they still called me.

Why use a joke in such circumstances? I was trying to be entertaining!—and cheekily implying they had better 'call' me as their minister, or they would never hear the rest of the story. I was also testing my audience: Had the congregation demurred rather than embracing the story I would have known it was not the right place for me'².

2. April Fool's Day

When April Fool's Day falls on a Sunday the temptation is irresistible. I announced in church that we as a congregation had received a letter from David Attenborough, the famous naturalist and TV personality, asking us to sign a petition to help save an endangered species. The animal concerned was the Squonk. The petition was at the back of the church. Would people please sign it at the end of the service! In a compassionate but authoritative voice I explained that:

The range of the squonk (*lacrimacorpus dissolvens*) is very limited. Few people outside of Pennsylvania have ever heard of the quaint beast, which [lives] in the hemlock forests of that State. The squonk is of a very retiring disposition, generally travelling about at twilight and dusk. Because of its miss-fitting skin, which is covered with warts and moles, it is always unhappy...Hunters who are good at tracking are able to follow a squonk by its tear-stained

² Cf. the Baptist scholar Lina Andronovienè (2014: 28): 'When I think of a good church, however, I always envision a community where we can laugh together. Otherwise, we have not yet become a community. The other necessary criterion is that we should be able to cry together'.

trail, for the animal weeps constantly. When cornered it may even dissolve itself in tears. [A hunter] made a clever capture by mimicking the squonk and inducing it to hop into a sack, in which he was carrying it home, when the burden lightened and the weeping ceased. [He] unslung the sack and looked in. There was nothing but tears and bubbles.³

The congregation enjoyed signing petitions and writing letters to M.P.s and the response to Mr. Attenborough's request was clearly going to be excellent (I only saw one congregant smiling broadly). So I read out: 'Please return the petition not to David Attenborough himself but to his secretary, Miss April... now what does the signature say? Ah yes, Miss April Foule'.

Another April Fool's Sunday came shortly after someone had entered the church during the week and found a bat flying around. With great presence of mind she had cornered the distressed creature and shooed it out to freedom. I now stood up to announce that unfortunately that had been quite the wrong thing to do. We had received a letter from the City Council to tell us that we must set off in the direction the bat had taken and make every effort to recover it and get it back into the church. When that was done the Council would send an operative to take charge of it. The congregation were almost on their feet and giving chase when somebody realised what day it was.

Prophets mock the *sins* of their audience but both these 'April fools' played fondly with the congregation's altruism. They did contain a gentle warning not to be credulous—the most ridiculous things can sound plausible if said in an authoritative voice! But the rightness of signing genuine petitions and rescuing bats was not undermined. The motivation of the pranks was to share a good laugh *en famille* on a most appropriate occasion. The spreading of misinformation *from the pulpit* does raise the issue: 'What is the status of the minister's words from the pulpit (when she or he is being 'serious')?' Are they undoubted truths to be accepted absolutely or suggestions and pointers from a fellow 'quester' (cf. Saroglou 2002: 177), to be tested and evaluated?⁴

³ Cox 1910. 31. The story was copied by Jorge Luis Borges in his *Book of Imaginary Beings* (1969), where I read it—as did the pop group Genesis who wrote a song about the squonk.

⁴ Cf. Saroglou 2002: 177: 'In this study, 72 individuals were tested in their propensity to produce humour in response to hypothetical daily hassles. Religiousness and religious fundamentalism were found to be negatively correlated with humour creation in response to these daily hassles, while quest religious orientation was positively correlated with humour creation in response to these same events. Fundamentalism values certainty, cognitive closure and traditional rules and ideas. People high in quest orientation are open when their beliefs are challenged; they see doubts positively (and consequently accept ambiguity) and do not reduce complexity of existential questions...Humour challenges established ideas, introduces

3. Christmas

The Nativity service was a well-worn tradition, and ripe for some modern variations on the ancient themes. I discovered later from a professor of Theology at the University of Durham that we were following a hallowed mediaeval practice by bending the story a little to introduce contemporary characters. One year three shepherds came to see baby Jesus in the stable: they were Alan Shepherd, the astronaut, the first American in space; David Sheppard, the England cricketer and later Bishop of Liverpool and (I was rather desperate) Jack Sheppard the eighteenth century thief, prison-escapee and popular hero. Then the three kings arrived: Martin Luther King and Billie Jean King the tennis champion, and finally—King Kong! My teenage son ran in dressed in a gorilla suit and chased me round the church.

The novel shepherds and kings asserted the relevance of Jesus to a wide contemporary audience—the world of sport, space technology, even criminals. The presence of King Kong affirmed that other-than-humans are dear to God and may worship him in their own way. This was another occasion of humor as celebration enjoyed in community (Andronoveienè 2014: 27).

4. Whimsy

Many a sermon has had a whimsical slant to it. One was based on a remark I overheard in Buxton market. “Superglue is really excellent (said one lady to another) in ideal conditions. But when do you ever get ideal conditions?” I preached on King Ahab in 1 Kings 21 who might in ideal conditions have resisted the temptation to steal Naboth’s vineyard. His own greed and pride, the taunts of his wife and a ‘too-good-to-miss’ opportunity, however, made the conditions for ethical decision-making far from ideal for him.

One Sunday in the interests of verisimilitude in the children’s address I put some scene-setting words *into* the mouth of the Elder on duty: ‘Mr C. said to me when I arrived in church this morning...’ At the end of the service this gentleman remonstrated with me. He had not said *that*. And if the minister was going to tell lies from the pulpit, where would it end? It is a good question. I would like to think the congregation could recognise a *poetic truth*. And, furthermore, do so without thinking that every aspect of Christianity should be so construed. I do believe it includes some historical facts.

ambiguity and incongruity (thus complexity) into existential questions, and introduces doubt as to the meaningfulness of life and the world. People high in quest orientation may be inclined to introduce or enjoy the incongruity, ambiguity, and complexity of humour’ (178-9).

5. Jewish-Christian Dialogue

All through my ministry I have been engaged in Christian-Jewish dialogue. I once taught a course on Spirituality which included a session on Judaism. To describe a certain sort of Jewish spirituality I quoted the following story about the festival of *Sukkot*:

There was a Jew who built a *sukkah* [a temporary dwelling]. But he didn't have sufficient materials with which to build his *sukkah*. What did he do? One wall he made ten handbreadths long from the roof down, and the rest he left empty. And the *halakah* is that if he had ten handbreadths of wall from the roof it is considered to be a full-length wall, as if the wall went all the way down to the ground. A second wall he built up only ten handbreadths from the ground; and according to the *halakah*, if he has ten handbreadths from the ground it is a wall which rises all the way to the roof. A third wall he built, according to what is written in the *gemore*, with no gap greater than three handbreadths, which is considered by the *halakah* to be fully solid. And the fourth he left open as a doorway [which is likewise judged *halakhically* to have the status of a wall]. And thus he had his four walls.

He then lay down to sleep inside this *sukkah*, took off his watch and put it beside the bed. When he arose he found that the watch was missing. He began to investigate. Heavenly Father, where did this thief enter? Here it is closed because of the principle that the wall comes down ten handbreadths. There it is closed because of the principle that the wall goes up ten handbreadths. Over there it is closed because the gaps are less than three handbreadths. And on the fourth side the doorway closes the wall. So from whence did he enter? He thought and thought until he concluded that the thief was no scholar, for he hadn't realised that the *sukkah* was completely closed! (Heilman 2002: 255-6).

Andronovienè risks the generalisation that 'an extensive use of humor has been a permanent feature of the Jews' (2014: 23n9). If we follow Sands' definition 'By humour I will refer to the faculty of finding and making amusement in conflict and incongruity' (2002: 500) we may imagine why. Judaism has had a longstanding conflict with the logic of the Christian religion and the western worldview it spawned. In the example above *halakah* demonstrates a kindlier

logic: since he does not have enough materials, what may be *considered* as though he did? But does this kindlier logic stand the test of real life? It would need the involvement of Jewish friends to take these thoughts further.

6. 'Laughing Jesus'

A picture of 'Laughing Jesus' was produced in Canada around 1973. The image was originally entitled 'Jesus Christ Liberator'⁵, so it may be that Jesus is smiling broadly at happy news or laughing with joy—rather than responding to the punch line of a joke. The image has been used, however, to probe the issue of whether Christians should be resolutely 'po-faced' or whether they ought to be susceptible to humor.⁶ We had a congregational weekend away on this theme, from which the following poetic extract comes:

...What is Jesus laughing at?
Surely not us, his serious disciples,
gathered to fathom the crises of the 21st century?

"Lighten up!" he seems to say,
"Consider the flowers and birds
that never fret but just *are*— I like them!"

"All very well, Lord, but we've got
church buildings to care for:
Your Father's house—*your* Table—
Consider the woodworm!

And then, more seriously still,
there is the task of passing on your story.
It won't be long, if we don't crack the problem,
before people seeing this picture

⁵ This can be viewed at <http://vancouver.sun.com> "Who was Canadian behind iconic image of 'Laughing Jesus'?", January 14th 2014, accessed September 19th 2020.

⁶ Cf. Andronovienè 2014: 32: 'One can sometimes despair at how weighted-down the churches have become, how in their seriousness they have lost the appropriate lightness'.

won't even know who the long-haired
laughing fellow is”.

“So, be serious, Jesus—and pay attention!
Stop fiddling with those jars
and turning water into wine—
It isn't funny!
Our certainties are in a fix;
our comfort zones are shrinking;
We feel as if some joker is calling us to walk on water.
We need a plan, a strategy, a ‘mission statement’”.

“Of course you do, my friends,
and I know life's not all laughter.
There is cross talk other than that between comedians.
Still, ‘Laughing Jesus’ is *not* a snap of me
in my ‘time off’.
To see the fun of life,
the life of fun
is not peripheral...”

The question whether Jesus ever laughed was aired in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) (cf. Andronovienè 2014: 26n18). People have cited a few images used by Jesus, like a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:25), as evidence that he had a humoristic bent. One of Eco's characters wonders if the remark “Let him who is without sin throw the first stone” (John 8:7) was meant to be funny. I think the case for Jesus as a humorist is not strong: but the case that he—the ‘son of man’, the ‘human one’—must be able to laugh with us at life's ironies and surprises is surely irrefutable.

7. Retirement

In retirement I am reading Rabelais, after a visit to his home at La Devinière in France last year. ‘Rabelaisian’ in English tends to mean ‘coarse’ and ‘obscene’. But there is much more to the writings of the great doctor, priest and epic humorist than that:

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In these astonishing chronicles, laughter is not confined to a watertight compartment. The ways of laughter can lead directly to the ways of Rabelais' God and to the words and signs through which he reveals his truth to enlightened men [and women] of all times. (Screech 1979: 26)

Over the last few months, I have also been putting together a slide show presentation about Laughter. Can this levity be justified during the tragic time of a pandemic? We have been living, and too many dying, in really dark times. Yet tragedy is not the whole story. We need relief, release of tension, lightening of our spirits and an assurance of good things in the world as well as bad.

As a serving minister I wrote sermons on the first 56 Psalms. A few days ago I began studying Psalm 57, which is serendipitously apposite to the pandemic:

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will
take refuge until destruction passes...(1)

Equally serendipitously, the Psalm climaxes with a comic image as the psalmist turns to describe his human enemies:

They set a net for my steps:
my soul was bowed down.
They dug a pit in my path,
but they have fallen into it themselves...(6)

'Life is like that, children'!

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