

LAUGHTER AND PASTORAL CARE

by Stephen Pattison

At the time of writing, Stephen Pattison was Lecturer in Pastoral Studies in the University of Birmingham, England. This article first appeared in modified form as a chapter in this book *A Critique of Pastoral Care* (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1988) and is used with permission of the author and publisher. It is one of the rare treatments of laughter and humor from any therapeutic field which Hakomi therapists, who use them both so liberally, can apply to their own reflections on the subject.

Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth or a wig. How many will own up to a lack of humor?²

The capacity to have a sense of humor and to be able to laugh is greatly valued in our own culture. But the significance of laughter as a fundamental feature distinguishing humans from animals was made in ancient civilizations. To be human was to be rational—but also to laugh. It is probably not overstating the case to say that laughter is one of the things that makes life worth living. For happy people their laughter is icing on the cake of good fortune. The laughter of unhappy and suffering people may be the only thing that keeps them going. For everyone, laughter has gracious and unbidden qualities similar to those ascribed to the Holy Spirit. Where it enters in, lives and situations can be transformed and transfigured, even if only temporarily, and the richness of new life in solidarity with others seems possible. Laughter, like love, cannot be commanded, contemplated or preserved. Like failure, laughter is so much a part of human experience that it is difficult to contemplate anything approximating to good total pastoral care which finds no place for it. Unfortunately, so far as one can tell, the Christian tradition and the pastoral care which accompanies it have found it very difficult to accommodate laughter and the humor it betokens in any very direct way. Cambell builds on Heije Faber's image of the clown as a model for ministry in suggesting that pastoral care must be expert yet spontaneous, immediate and simple, loyal and vulnerable and able to join in prophetic divine laughter at itself and the world.⁸

Meister Eckart locates joyous laughter in the Godhead itself in the following, rather enigmatic, words:

The soul gives birth to the person of the world 'when God laughs at her and she

laughs back'; the Son and the Father thus delight in each other 'and this laughter breeds liking and liking breeds joy, joy begets love, love begets the person (of the World), who begets the Holy Spirit'.

The experience of laughter is universal and commonplace, yet theology has almost completely ignored it. It is a consolation in these circumstances to find that other disciplines have given it almost as embarrassingly little attention. If there is laughter in heaven, surely it does not arise from aggression, defeat or frustration. I therefore want to distinguish the laughter of delight which flows from a sense of well-being and being loved. This kind of mirth can be seen in children and particularly in babies. The beloved child in whom its parents delight seems, at least sometimes, to laugh just because she is alive and secure. The laughter of children cannot betoken much self-awareness or perception of incongruity because of their lack of mental development and it sometimes seems to betoken sheer joy and delight in existence. It has very little to do with humor, jokes, or perspective. In many ways, then, it is this naive or primal laughter which flows from an unreflective and total awareness of loving and being loved which is idealized and sought after by the theologians reflecting on the relationship of a loving Father with his children. It is unambiguously good and desirable, the consummation and outward sign of loving intimacy which totally involves rather than distancing. something of its essence is sensed by Helen Merrell Lynd:

Humor that arises from enjoyment of the predicament of others may betoken a cynical self-interest which can be a warping experience for the observer as well as for the person observed. This is not all of laughter. 'When you laugh' says Turgenev, 'you forgive and are ready to love.' This existence of

primal, or naive laughter highlights another very important and obvious fact, namely that there is not always a connection between laughter and humor. The presence of laughter does not necessarily imply that something amusing or funny is happening. Laughter is a reflex, but it is not a simple reflex. It is under the control of the nervous centers and is affected by consciousness. When laughter is associated with humor and the latter's possibilities for gaining a different perspective on a situation, it has enormous value in pastoral care. Of course, in a very real sense, the value of laughter cannot be measured, any more than that of happiness. Nor could laughter be programmed into pastoral care self-consciously, for it has the quality of an elusive and spontaneous gift. Nonetheless, it is possible to make some observations on the positive aspects of humor and laughter for carers and those cared for, in very general terms.

The first thing to point out is that laughter is distinctively human. Where laughter is heard, albeit that it may be low, angry or even insane, there can be no doubt that people are involved. The sound of laughter can remind pastoral carers and those for whom they care that they remain human and have the hope of human potential, however unlikely that may seem in any given situation. When laughter and the humor in can betoken is entirely absent, there may well be cause of anxiety that a person or a situation is losing contact with humanity. It is only slightly overstating the case to say that to lose one's sense of humor and the capacity to laugh is to lose at least part of one's soul. The same thing can be said about pastoral care in general; where all is given up to serious planning for people's good and to sober intense individual encounters, where there is no ghost of a smile, pastoral care may be in danger of becoming inhuman. There is much to weep about and despair of in the human condition. But there is much to laugh about too; the furrowed brow of concern needs at least occasionally to give way to the raised eyebrows of hilarity. Where people cannot laugh at all, and are gripped by despair, it is a signal that the best and most urgent kinds of pastoral care are badly needed to stand by and assist wounded humanity. This pastoral care might be bereavement visiting of a very depressed person or trying to alleviate unemployment with its attendant misery. There is

much which prevents people from laughing today.

Laughter points to essential humanity in pastoral care and its absence can be an indicator of inhumanity and diminishment. Since laughter is usually a thing experienced with other people and is usually enhanced if shared, it is also something which has the capacity to indicate and create greater mutuality in pastoral care. Of course, it is possible for laughter to be a sign of distance and contempt, but more often in sensitive pastoral care it bears witness to and generates real warmth, mutuality, sharing and solidarity. Humor can cement people together in a unique way, helping them to realize that they are not on their own in the situations they face. Indeed, the more threatening and awful reality may be, the more it may be possible for people to join together in laughter in the face of a common enemy.

By far the most important benefit conferred by humor and laughter in pastoral care is the sense of distance and perspective. It will be recalled that this lies at the heart of some of the main theories of laughter discussed above. somehow, humor requires a step back from the situation in which one is involved so that the incongruities in it are seen. This is the process of 'seeing the funny side' of the situation, or even of the self and its actions. When people can take this step back, things come into proportion and can be seen in perspective more easily. For those who are suffering or involved in deeply troubling circumstances, the advent of laughter can be a sign of great hope, for it means that they are in some way transcending themselves and their circumstances. It means that they have the problem or the difficulty, rather than the problem or the difficulty having them. A sense of some control, or mastery, can at least be glimpsed through humor even if there is no prospect of easy solution or quick release from bad circumstances. It is certainly true that there are some situations which defy humor and laughter and where no distance is possible; severely depressed people, for example, are completely caught up in their own suffering and attempts to joke with or 'cheer them up' can be misplaced. But many very serious situations do have their funny side which can be recognized and used to lighten them. It is possible, then, for problems and difficulties to be faced in a 'euphoric' rather than a 'dyphoric' mode. This does not minimize or seek to escape from harsh reality but allows it to be coped with more adequately and pleasantly.⁴⁰

Sometimes the perspective provided by humor allows people to change and grow; their past ways of behaving and responding seem literally ridiculous and so can be surrendered. At other times, it simply helps people to endure and retain their self-respect in overwhelmingly difficult circumstances. These remarks are summed up by the following comment on the Jews:

For Jews, life is funny in every possible sense, but Jewish humor, born of accumulated anguish, actually takes life very seriously. It is an attempt to root out the meaning of experiences, to posit a certain control over them and exercise some independence from them, to penetrate the heart of suffering so as to rise above it, to save some sanity and to find just a little compensation. It bespeaks the poignancy of Jewish life: the tears of laughter and the laughter through tears.⁴¹

At the same level of the individual the humorous perspective seems to be able to accomplish results which no other approach can touch. In a very positive way it can liberate people from self-absorption. They can, as it were stand outside of themselves and in so doing become open to others. IT Can do a great deal to set people free from two very destructive attitudes to themselves, pride and self-humiliation, allowing a more realistic and healthy humility or true self-acceptance to enter in:

Sometimes humor can expose the fantasies which underline my pride or my self-humiliation, rendering them vulnerable to an insight in which they lose their own power over me—for a crucial moment at least... A sharp, penetrating joke can prick my pompous pretensions, bringing me down to earth. Or, alternatively, it can pierce through the prison walls of my sober self-abasement, jolting me into an initiative towards freedom.⁴²

It is important to add the words with which Evans goes on:

But the humor must be gentle and humane, generating a kindly chuckle at another of the funny foibles of humanity. If the exposure is too stark and savage, it may destroy me along with pride, or shame me into deeper self-humiliation.⁴³

The theologian Harry Williams believes that laughter is the beginning of self-acceptance and forgiveness, mirroring God's forgiveness and acceptance. It helps to get the self in proportion and opens the path to forgiving others:

God, we believe, accepts us, accepts all men, unconditionally, warts and all. Laughter is our purest form of our response to \God's acceptance of us. For when I laugh at myself I accept myself and when I laugh at other people in genuine mirth I accept them. Self-acceptance in laughter is the very opposite of self-satisfaction or pride... In laughing at my own claims to importance or regard I receive myself in a sort of loving forgiveness which is an echo of God's forgiveness for me.⁴⁴

At their best and most positive, humor and laughter can be enormously enriching. They can reveal and reinforce a sense of humanity, rediscover a sense of mutuality, re-define and relieve even the most difficult situations, help reconcile people to themselves and others and help them to recognize the reality of situations and selves from a different angle. But there is a problem. Humor and laughter relativize; that is to say that with their 'as if' perspective they tend to de-bunk established ways of seeing and traditional authorities. There may be a difficulty here for those who exercise pastoral care in a very traditional perspective, for once they start 'seeing the funny side' in pastoral care they may find that all sorts of other areas also dissolve in ridicule and laughter. Some people would argue that this is one of the reasons why humor and religion are incompatible.⁴⁵ Religion is absolute and can only be seen in one way. When it becomes possible to see things from different (and perhaps irreverent) angles, the gods fall from heaven and things can never be quite so certain again. Pastoral care in this context cannot therefore simply 'use' humor and laughter; it will be transformed by it also and, like religion, it may find its pomposity pricked and its solemn good order destroyed for ever. There is a price to be paid for the entry of the non-orderly phenomenon of laughter into pastoral care.

It should also be remembered that laughter is an ambivalent thing and has a hard side which may manifest itself in pastoral care. Humor and laughter can be signs of callousness, cynicism, escapism and lack of involvement. They can be

used as nothing more than an analgesic to take away present pain while distracting people from facing up to reality and seeking to change it. To the extent that laughter enables a relatively passive tolerance of the intolerable it must be regarded with grave suspicion in pastoral care. That fact is that, in themselves humor and laughter are not necessarily unequivocally good and desirable. Their value and appropriateness must be carefully assessed in each pastoral situation. With this warning in mind can we go on to look at the meaning and use of laughter in the individual pastoral encounter.

LISTENING TO LAUGHTER: WHAT'S IN A LAUGH?"

It should be becoming clear by now that humor and laughter are very complex. In terms of the individual pastoral encounter this has direct practical implications. It is not enough to assume that laughter is a sign of happiness and well-being, though of course sometimes it is. Instead, the meaning of laughter must be discerned and interpreted. The questions must be asked: 'What is in this laugh? What is the meaning for this person of her laughter in the present context?' If laughter is carefully listened to and its significance is successfully elicited, it can cast a great deal of light on the situation of the person being cared for. People laugh for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes, for from expressing their true feelings, laughter can be used as a mask for feelings. In this defensive usage, the logic might run, 'I am laughing therefore I must be all right and happy. I do not need to look inside myself and I do not need help from anyone else. Everyone can see I am OK.' This kind of laughter can easily put a pastor off, making it very difficult to get beneath the surface and to offer help which may be very much needed.

Another kind of laughter is occasioned by feelings of embarrassment or shame. A person feels that some innermost thing has been revealed and in the absence of any alternative, such as running away, they may dissipate their tension in laughter which may well sound shallow and nervous. There is nothing amusing about being embarrassed, ashamed or anxious, so this kind of laughter has no particularly humorous connotation. In the same vein, it is quite common for people to direct scorn and derision at themselves in their laughter. They have stood back from themselves, but they despise what they see within

or their own behavior and their laughter becomes a way of directing hostile feeling towards themselves. There is nothing more painful than to witness a person cynically and vindictively making themselves the butt of their own bitter humor. It is almost a kind of self-mutilation and it is very important that pastors should not join in by laughing along with the person they are caring for. There is also a more defensive kind of laughter which is associated with self-mockery. The logic lying behind this is that a person criticizes and mocks herself, this will prevent others from doing so. Holding oneself up as an object of ridicule may prevent others from criticizing, but it also keeps them at arm's length. Judgment and support are both pre-empted.

Not all laughter has these negative connotations, however. Mercifully, people do sometimes find things which are genuinely amusing in pastoral encounters and laugh at them. They may laugh at themselves in a genuinely accepting way. Often, laughter accompanies some new insight into the self or the person's situation—they see the funny side of things with its incongruities and limitations. When support and understanding is offered, there may be the laughter of relief from anxiety or the delight of solidarity. Sometimes it betokens a complex mixture of feelings. Types of laughter are endless, as are the moods which they indicate. People laugh joyfully, angrily, bitterly, nervously, and so on. The point is that it is absolutely necessary to discern the meaning of laughter for the person concerned if the pastor is to be able to help them. Sometimes it will be useful to ask a person what their laughter means to them, for they may not themselves appreciate its significance.

But it is not enough for pastors just to listen to the laughter of those they care for. They must also try to understand the significance of humor and laughter in their own lives, interactions and ministry. Some pastors pride themselves on their sense of humor and their love of a good joke. This may be a good thing, but is it always a good thing in every circumstance? For them, as much as for anyone else, humor can be a defense against being open about their real feelings which may be far from jolly and benevolent at times, or against having to take people seriously. Again, humor can be a form of disguised aggression against people. Many pastors feel constrained to be nice and kind to people under all circumstances but may inwardly harbor a sense of grievance against

those who make demands upon them. One way in which they can express hostility in a relatively acceptable way is through humor. The trouble is that those who seek the pastor's are may well pick up the veiled aggression contained in jokes and wisecracks so trust is damaged. People seeking care may also very well be put off by someone who appears to laugh a great deal, whatever the circumstance. Laughter is an ambivalent communication and persons desiring care may be puzzled or worried by it, particularly if they do not know the pastor personally very well. People who are deeply distressed may find a laughing pastor difficult to approach as they may assume that he is unsympathetic to the sorrowful. They may even feel that they do not want to make her sorrowful! Pastors who have a sense of humor and laughter can also be seduced into trying to impress or amuse the people in their care with jokes and repartee. There is certainly a place for this at times, but it is an obstacle if the person cared for becomes no more than an audience. Lastly, it is sometimes possible for people who need care to deflect the pastor's attention from their needs by appealing to her sense of humor. It is easy for pastors to be drawn into a web of laughter which may be ultimately very unhelpful to the person being cared for who needs to face up to the real difficulties and opportunities of a situation. All this means that the pastor has to listen to her own laughter as well as that of those she offers care to. In doing this she will stand a better chance of making humor and laughter an appropriate and liberating aspect of pastoral care rather than an obstacle to it.

A pastor who tells jokes to those who come to her for help is using an unoriginal form of humor which is not specifically related to the present situation of the needy person. If she adopts a light-hearted bantering tone this may help some people, but it may make others feel rejected or belittled. By far the best way of engendering humor which is likely to be helpful in pastoral care, then, is to help the person seeking care to develop their own humorous perspective. This will not crush or attack her and will become a real part of her own view of the world. Pastors can encourage such a perspective by having one themselves and by trying to reinforce humorous awareness in those they care for. If they are willing to discover and disclose the incongruities in their own situation, this can create an environment of mutuality where those who seek care can also begin to experiment with humor and laugh-

ter. The key factor is that the person cared for is not made the victim of the pastor's wit. The pastor may be willing to make a fool of herself and reveal it to those in her care, she does not make them feel fools! The social worker, Bill Jordan, is a leading exponent of this 'humor by example' school:

I believe that social workers have to be prepared to make fools of themselves from time to time, and to be made fools of by others ... If a social worker spends his time trying to safeguard himself against being made to look ridiculous he is likely to limit his opportunities for giving real help to his clients. It is better to let the ridiculous happen, and then try to use it creatively; or failing that, simply to endure it.⁴⁶

There is a real place for becoming a fool in pastoral care, for Christ's sake, for the sake of those who seek pastoral care, but also for the pastor's own sake. Pastors, after all, have just as much right to be foolish as the rest of the human race. If they can give up their claims to professional earnestness and intensity, a difficult thing to do for people who sometimes want to be taken very seriously indeed, their care might be enriched, the burdens of those they care for might be lightened—and pastoral care might be a lot more fun.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION: CONTEMPLATION, LAUGHTER AND PASTORAL CARE

It is a curious fact that very saintly people often seem to possess a very fine sense of humor as well as very real compassion for other human beings. Those who spend a great deal of time in the solitary, difficult and sober business of prayer can often appear to be more involved, sensitive and humorous than those who never pray and remain firmly involved in the humdrum activities of everyday life.

So, for example, a person like the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton fled the world into a monastery but paradoxically became more involved in, and compassionate towards that world by campaigning for peace in his writings. At the same time as he became more involved in passionate struggle for world peace, Merton also managed to cultivate a sense of compassionate but humorous detachment about himself and even about the things he thought were most important. In a way, as he

grew older he took himself and the world in which he lived both more and less seriously.

It is not an accident that deep spirituality or contemplation can be associated with a humorous outlook on the world. Contemplation consists in coming to see the nature of reality through God's eyes.

It puts a different perspective on life and throws its tragedies, but also its incongruities, into relief. In contemplation, as in humor, a sense of distance and perspective is created and so laughter can burst through. It is not a sign of ironic detachment, or contempt for creation, or people. It is more the laughter of delighted recognition and acceptance which springs from the knowledge of God as loving Father. This kind of laughter betokens simultaneously the possibility of intense involvement but also detachment. It puts failure and success into their correct proportions and resists totalitarian fanaticism and utilitarian benevolence without belittling human efforts to change and create a better future.

Humor and spirituality are inextricable intertwined in Christianity but modern pastoral care has often seemed to lack both, to judge from much of the material reviewed in this book. In the thick of its intense and proper battle against dehumanizing sin and sorrow, pastoral care can easily lose any sense of perspective.

Perhaps it is this which has led to its being seen by some people as no more than social work undertaken by a religious agency. IN the end, the thing that Christian ministry distinctively has to offer people is not good works or righteous actions, but a way of seeing reality: "To contemplate is to see, and to minister is to make *visible*."⁴⁸ Christian pastoral care badly needs to rediscover the possibility of involved detachment based on the perspective gained by trying to see the world through God's eyes and so seeing reality as it is. The outward sacrament of this rediscovery will be the sound of laughter. This is as it should be, for Christianity embodies the truth of the resurrection. And what is resurrection but a laugh freed for ever and for ever.⁴⁹

Paradoxically, it may be that it is only when pastoral care gains the perspective which allows it to see itself as a joke—a bad joke even—that it will be beginning to take God and reality seriously.

FOOTNOTES

2. Frank Moore Colby, quoted in Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, 'Introduction' in Tony Chapman and Hugh Foot, (eds), *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, Wiley 1976, p. i.
8. Cf. Heije Faber, *Pastoral care in the modern Hospital*, SCM PRESS 1971, pp. 81-92. The clown image receives its full exposition in a book about pastoral care in psychiatric hospitals, Roger Grainger, *Watching for Wings*, Darton, Longman & Todd 1979.
21. Quoted in Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, Darton, Longman & Todd 1979, p. 134.
38. Helen Merrell Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity*, New York: Harcourt Brace 1958, p. 147.
40. See Harvey Mindess, 'The use and abuse of humor in psychotherapy', in Tony Chapman and Hugh Foot (eds), *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, Wiley 1976, p. 335.
41. Angela Wood, 'Telling it like it is: Teaching Judaism through story and humor', *British Journal of Religious Education* 3, 1981, 151-6, p. 151.
42. Donald Evans, *Struggle and Fulfillment*, Collins 1980, pp.115-16.
43. Ibid.
44. Harry Williams, *Tensions*, Mitchell Beazley 1979, p.111
45. See Cox, op. cit., p. 154.
46. Bill Jordan, *Helping in Social Work*, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1979, p. 120.
47. Cf. Mindess, op. cit., p.341.
48. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, New York: Doubleday 1979, p. 88.
49. Patrick Kavanagh, 'Lough Derg', quoted in Hardy and Ford, op. cit., p. 73.