

Editorial

Allan Rudy-Froese

Some kinds of religious humor are not hard to pull off. There you are in a grand cathedral with a few dozen whispering pilgrims. The place is immense—not at all like your church back home. You walk reverentially to the statue of Mary and child and then on to a taller statue of an intense man with a book in his hands. Is it Isaiah, Luke, a saint? You gaze up to the colorful stained-glass windows and then on to the grand ceiling held up by sturdy columns. With your neck and eyes strained to peer to the heights, you are captivated by angels, meditating the immortal God of the heavens.

And then someone in the quiet cathedral loudly flatulates.

Here in this moment of rapture with the Holy, a gaseous human sound pierces your mediation. The high and holy God you have been pondering has been dropped into the aisle.

There would be many reactions to such an event from those scattered throughout the cathedral. Some would laugh aloud and then almost immediately try to stifle their innate response. Others might smile and let out a small laugh to themselves or a friend close by. A pilgrim or two would try as best they can to pretend it did not happen—but may chat about it later. Yet others who hear the ripping interruption would show their offense by grimly looking around to eye the guilty party.

High and low

Religious humor, in this form, is composed of the sudden and surprising incongruity between the high and low. The immortal God, God's angels, and the sacred are high. The low is the mortal human with noxious gases, an entirely necessary but private orifice, and an all-too-human sound. Bringing the high and the low together in this way often results in laughter or at least an amused giggle. And it is not just those who are immediately present who find it funny. Those who are looking in on the scene (the fourth wall: we who are reading presently) can keep laughing by witnessing the many responses of the pilgrims. We can laugh at those who pretend that nothing happened and at those who are looking in the low light for the vulgar culprit.

The humor of high and low is not just for the religious realm. The comedy troupe Monty Python plays on this kind of humor over and over again: kings and queens, lords and ladies, knights, bishops, and the well-heeled are all brought down to their earthy selves. In a song by Monty Python, those whose musical compositions take us to the heavens are brought low, even unto death and the grave with “decomposing composers.” Here is just one verse:

*Verdi and Wagner delighted the crowds
With their highly original sound.
The pianos they played are still working,
But they're both six feet underground.*

Humor that brings high and low together is common in cartoon strips, television and film comedies, and stand-up comedy routines. Parents are rated with a checklist by their smarty-pants six-year-old and found wanting. Politicians and lawyers are endlessly portrayed as the “bottom of the barrel” in multiple ways. The comedian speaks about a profound, heartfelt experience and then drops the F-bomb. The emperor found without those dapper clothes is the classic joke in this genre. While these



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highs and lows play on caricature, these categories still stick, or we wouldn't laugh.

We may think that comedy that trades in high and low is a cheaper or simpler form of comedy, like slapstick and physical humor. Indeed, my story of farting in the cathedral is scatological humor, the lowest of all. (Really, Allan, you had to go *there*?) Most readers of *Vision* are from this “low” church tradition, which does not have us gazing at statues and ceilings to seek for the sacred. We are simple worshipers whose highest point of gaze is the Christian sibling

next to us in the pew. True, if we dare to look higher, we can take in the recently homemade banner. Furthermore, our children are right here with us in worship, and we welcome their lovely innocent sounds.

While it is true that we are not a cathedral people, there remain echoes of the high and the low in our religious life when it comes to how we think

about laughter and humor. In her article “The wit and wisdom of humor,” Melissa Hofstetter relays the experience of church folks silencing their laughter or R-rated conversation when the pastor walks by. Playwright, director, and actor Johnny Wideman, in “Clench and release,” notes that when Theatre of the Beat performs live dramas in churches on current churchly issues, they often have a “plant” to get the laughter going. We actually need to give permission to laugh in church. Moreover, two of our writers, Wideman and Andrew Unger, in “A time to laugh and a time to speak,” wonder if there is a connection between our lofty tenet of pacifism and our lack of ease with humor on churchly issues.

Have we produced a people who are so serious about our godly and special mission in the world that we cannot thoroughly enjoy a belly laugh?

While we continue to wrestle and dance with the idea of a high God and a low humanity, one of the remarkable themes that runs through this volume is a clear acceptance of our bodies as made in the image of God for humor, laughter, play, and joyful celebration. In the last twenty years or so, we have become more comfortable theologically and otherwise with these fleshly and earthy bodies as the location for God’s presence in the world. This volume affirms and contributes to this ongoing religious conversation about the human body in relation to God. When working in the area of laughter, humor, and joy, we cannot help but go to the body. We are taken here to the human body that smiles, laughs, giggles, weeps, clenches, sings, releases, praises, and plays. The body is good—and not low at all, especially in the eyes of God.

Serious and humorous

Another topic in the realm of humor—religious and otherwise—is how we get from serious to funny. Here we look to the horizontal rather than the vertical. We are interested in the chasm to be spanned or the journey to be taken from trauma to laughter, tragedy to comedy, structural racism to joy, or catastrophe to praise. All of our writers wrote in the midst of a global pandemic and the individual, communal, economic, and national

crises that have remade our lives. We all dared to write about laughter, humor, and joy in the wake of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others at the hands of oppressive, white, racist people and systems. By March and April of this year, I questioned whether we could even write and publish a volume on laughter during times like these.

It turns out that this volume on laughter is balm for the weary soul. While therapists Hofstetter and Pierson help us here in direct ways, all



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of our writers helpfully take us to places where we look with brutal honesty at the world as it is and the possibility of laughter and joy. In Nekeisha Alayna Alexis's article "I *will* rejoice," she introduces us to testimonies from African American women who are deeply shaped by a tradition imbued with deep trust in God and profound spiritual practices that sustain body, soul, and community in the midst of continuing oppressive systems. The

following reflections from W. Jean Mayes, Stephanie Coleman, Regina Shands Stoltzfus, and Ashlee Pierson display how this deep trust in God, close community, and honest testimony about what has been, what is, and what could be can enable laughter and joy to flourish. Likewise, in "Shout to God with joyful praise!" Carrie Badertscher and David Cramer describe joy as a wellspring that goes deeper than our experience of laughter. In "Playing together," Susan Fish tells of gathering quarantine-isolated persons together on Zoom to read dramas. New friends are made and laughter abounds when a space is made to play together—even if the play is a murder mystery. In "Walking together hand in hand," Ben Borne relays his own story of how he copes with new employment realities, the death of a loved one, and being a gay man in hostile settings, while remaining a man of joy and humor. In "Welcoming another through laughter," Pratik Bagh, a newcomer to the United States from India, gives testimony to the warm welcome he received at a local church when he and his wife, Shabnam, arrived in Elkhart, Indiana, a few years ago. As he describes, a gentle smile and shared laughter can go a long way in bridging cultural, racial, and national boundaries in initial encounters.

In this volume, we wrestle with the deadly serious and the knee-slappingly humorous. This move to laughter in the midst of personal and societal catastrophe is perhaps not so much a bridge to cross as a dance

where tears mix with laughter, pain mingles with joy, and tragedy and comedy tango. We are not in this alone, and by the grace of God, serious and funny miraculously belong together—otherwise, we would never be able to laugh.

The labor of laughter

While these pages reveal that laughter, humor, and moments of joy are often spontaneous, living a life that has capacity for these good things often requires hard work and lifelong engagement. The joy inherent in the

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Black Joy described by Alexis is embedded in spirituals, the bonds of community, and continual prayer and singing. It takes investment. The playwright spends countless hours working and reworking the play alone and with others to find the place where the church might laugh in that one line that is a stinging, yet humorous, indictment of the church. In “The Mennonite clergy card,” Jim Loepp Thiessen reminds us that the “work” of telling and retelling funny stories and making up new ones from daily

life has a way of sustaining our sense of humor. Our readers of the Bible (preachers and otherwise) take hours—even years—of dedicated study to find that human and humorous moment with Job, Sara, Abraham, Jesus, and many others who we all thought were such serious people. Michele Rae Rizoli, Paul Keim, Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau, and Ben C. Ollenburger take us to the Bible and allow us to see the comedy therein. They mine this high-held, serious book for its earthy characters and dialogues that are not unlike our own in their familiar comedy.

We may wonder whether this humor that we find in the Bible is intended by the authors. One way to find out is to get into the texts and stories named by our writers and try them with friends. Be curious and use your voices and bodies as you retell these stories. Get down on the floor with Job and his friends. Go close to Jesus and hear his irony. Finding the funny takes investment. Bible study would be much more entertaining and sustaining if we read the text with a sense of the full range of human emotions and bodily expression. Sarcasm, hyperbole, and the absurd, along with physical and scatological humor, have been with us

since Adam and Eve and will remain until the apocalypse—and perhaps long after. The laughs are there for the finding.

In an editorial meeting when this volume was in the works, someone asked, “I know that we can produce something good that is *about* laughter, but will it be funny?” I think the answer is yes, you will laugh. You will be giggled and joyed into new ideas, spiritualities, and ways of looking at the Bible, church, community, and politics. Comedians are some of the best social, political, and religious critics of our age. There is a slanted view of reality that ushers us into some of the most potent realities of personal, communal, political, and religious life. Take a look, for instance, at Jacqueline Hoover’s, “Face veils and face masks.” Her article ushers us into the comic clash of COVID-19 facemasks and burqa-clad Muslim women. We laugh with Muslim women at, among other things, the hypocrisy of Western Christianity’s reluctance and even stern opposition to accept veiled faces.

In this issue, we hear from comedians and joyous leaders in the church who masquerade as pastor, therapist, playwright, actor, antiracism professional, academic, communications expert, administrator, and novelist. Thanks be to God for those among us who bring on the comedy, testify to joy, make us laugh, and at the same time usher us into God’s gospel for our time.

About the author

Allan Rudy-Froese is associate professor of Christian proclamation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, and adjunct professor at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario. He teaches preaching, voice, storytelling, and performance theory. Allan divides his time between Kitchener, Ontario, and Elkhart. On the frequent road trips back and forth, he listens to theologians, rock and roll music, and comedians.