

Lady are also to be seen, though it was only in the bazaar at Tehran that I saw representations of the Last Supper in tapestry. At Mashad the most popular religious souvenirs are seals and signet rings, sometimes made of real precious stones, but more often of imitation ones manufactured in Hong Kong or Japan. They are engraved with verses from the Koran, or with the popular ejaculatory prayer 'Ya! Ali!', in honour of the first Imam. It is very common for males to wear this prayer on a gold medallion round the neck. However not all the shops at Mashad display religious souvenirs. One can buy ordinary household articles near the shrine as well as foodstuffs, and even ready-made sets of false teeth.

It is very difficult to get inside the shrine at Mashad, or into the adjoining mosques. I had hoped to slip in unobserved among the great concourse of people who were pouring in through the doors in readiness for the evening prayers, but I was spotted as an intruder and asked to leave by the mosque guards. This took place a few minutes before the prayers were due to begin and I had time to see that the whole surface of the courtyard was covered with male worshippers, seated cross-legged on the ground. The side halls were also filled with men, some seated on carpets, and some with the back supported against a pillar in an attitude which was relaxed and contemplative. There is something very wonderful and moving about these worshippers. The large amount of free space gives them a wide choice of posture and the absence of chairs and pews permits a sense of relaxation and freedom. I was left wondering if we have not, in the West, sacrificed something very important by being so functional about our worship. I would like as many people as possible to go to Mashad and make at least two visits to the shrine, one outside prayer time for the architecture, and one at the time of prayer to observe the people. Simply to stand in one of the great entrance courts—which was all that I was finally allowed to do—at the hour of evening prayer, with the golden minarets appearing over the roofs, when the call to prayer floats out into the gathering darkness is to undergo an intense religious experience which can never be forgotten.

Christian Laughter

by Peter W. Jones

The title that I have chosen for this article is far from being a gimmick designed to lure anyone with an eye for the unusual. Some years ago I tried to put together a paper entitled *Theology of Leisure*.¹ I should like to think that the present title is a more precise attempt

to tackle the same question that still lies at the back and bottom of my mind.

Leisure, of course, defies definition. A glance at *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* will verify the fact.² What I call leisure other people receive good salaries for doing, and consequently they call it work. I have long nourished, for instance, a secret ambition to be an inspector for Diners Club or a member of the British Board of Film Censors.

Moreover, when one does attempt a clear definition of leisure, one is inevitably caught up in sociological technicalities which simply describe leisure activities as they exist in today's society, without going on to probe the creative human values inherent in leisure as such.³ For this one has to turn not to the sociologist but to the poet, the philosopher and the theologian.

One concretely helpful thing, however, I did learn from my investigations into the *Theology of Leisure*. That thing was that it can be very revealing to consider human activities in terms of *primary activity* (i.e. work, career and family) and *secondary activity*, or those things that a man does outside his chief duties to amuse himself.⁴ We traditionally try to discover creative and humanising elements in the first, but tend on the whole to regard leisure as a mere aid to one's main activity. Yet what if a genuine god-like character is inherent in leisure itself? What if our traditional theology has been rather top-heavy with duty-values and work-values? A theology of sweat rather than of laughter.

Biology shows the need for a time free from physical labours to recuperate from fatigue. It is, then, the task of the theologian to relate this need for rest and change to man's spiritual life. If leisure is usually a time when one can laugh and play without taking one's activity too seriously, and if our theology is to be one that takes into account the whole of man's existence, then it too must make room for laughter and enjoyment. There should be, that is to say, a genuine Christian *spirituality of laughter*.

Laughter

It is practically impossible to make sense of the lengthy list of occasions which provoke laughter in human beings.⁵ At one extreme we have the phenomenon of the seaside postcard, at the other the laughter of the divine Wisdom delighting to play with the children of men.⁶ Theatre and film are full of scenes in which one character sees something as hilarious while others find it quite serious and unfunny.

One element remains, however, constant throughout the history of western civilization, namely that even those in exalted positions must learn to laugh at themselves if they are to be regarded as truly wise. The King always has his jester, and every village its fool. At a papal coronation there is a special place for the man who walks beside the *sedia gestatoria* repeating over and over again to the newly elected

pontiff: 'Remember man that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return'.

Johan Huizinga's deservedly famous *Homo Ludens*⁷ gives us much insight into the rôle of playfulness and the game element in western history. It would seem that Christianity itself demanded that people be given 'time off' from their supposedly serious occupations in order to celebrate. The holy-day was always a first cousin of the holiday. Anyone who has attended one of the numerous patronal *feste* in an Italian village will know the seriousness with which these people regard relaxation. After all it is only really important things that are truly worthy of laughter. That is why there are so many jokes about sex and religion.

Literature abounds with caricatures of the humourless man. One of the most amusing, and at the same time realistic of these is Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*.⁸ George F. Babbitt was totally unable to laugh at himself. The society in which he lived had tricked him into taking it with the utmost seriousness. Thus every waking moment had to be lived according to specific though unwritten rules and dictates; outside them there was nothing but the ultimate disaster—failure. Babbitt was even woken up as befitted a success:

'It was the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks with all modern attachments, including cathedral chimes, intermittent alarm, and a phosphorescent dial. Babbitt was proud of being awakened by such a rich device. Socially, it was almost as creditable as buying expensive cord tires.'⁹

Here we are presented with one who knows only one game, and takes it with so much seriousness that he cannot recognise its limits as being narrower than those of life itself. The metaphors are dated; the phenomenon is not. How often have I noticed a similar tendency in journalism, for instance, to take the game of politics with the same all-absorbing seriousness. As the court jester was too often ignored, so too the cartoonists are not taken seriously enough today.

Those who have only one all-absorbing game in life and so cannot laugh at it lest reality dissolve around them have relinquished some essential part of their human freedom. Yet there are others who, though they profess to be engaged on a quest for freedom, are in fact no less trapped. These are the people (not all of them young people) who are involved in no game at all. They too are devoid of laughter since they have no games important enough to play. They are the target of Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*,¹⁰ and less recently the subject of Aldous Huxley's *Accidie*.¹¹ Arthur Miller discovered this phenomenon at first hand when he spent several months roaming the streets of New York with a delinquent gang. He wrote a summary of his experiences for *Harpers Magazine*:

'The boredom of the delinquent is remarkable mainly because it is so little compensated for, as it may be among the middle classes

and the rich who can fly down to the Caribbean or to Europe, or refurbish the house, or have an affair, or at least go shopping. The delinquent is stuck with his boredom, stuck inside it, stuck to it, until for two or three minutes he "lives", he goes on a raid around the corner and feels the thrill of risking his skin or life as he smashes a bottle filled with gasoline on some other kid's head. In a sense it is his trip to Miami. It makes his day. It is his shopping tour. It gives him something to talk about for a week. It is LIFE. Standing around with nothing to do is as close to dying as you can get. Unless one grasps the power of boredom, the threat of it to one's existence, it is impossible to "place" the delinquent as a member of the human race.¹²

Just as Babbitt was humourless because of his obsession with one single 'game', so Miller's delinquents are humourless because of their inability to take any part of life seriously enough. While Babbitt has narrowed down God to prestige and status, the delinquent described above finds the idea of God too vacuous, vapid and meaningless to be relevant. The Christian and human adventure, therefore, appears now as a quest for a balance between playing one game too seriously in life, and playing no game at all. At neither extreme can there be laughter.

From this perspective laughter begins to appear as proper to the man who can involve himself in worldly games yet without closing his eyes to the fact that the *are* games. The man, in fact, who is *in the world yet not of it*.¹³

Laughter and Spirituality

If I am right about the importance of being able to laugh at the relativity of earthly 'games', then it should be possible to speak of a genuine spirituality of laughter, by which is meant the gift or talent of refusing to take absolutely seriously those things which are of less than ultimate concern. Here is included, of course, oneself. The dangers of taking oneself with absolute seriousness are enumerated on every page of the old moral theology textbooks. Unfortunately these books belie themselves in the seriousness with which they take human sin. There is a certain pride (and therefore lack of sense of humour) in the illusion that one's sins are dreadful or wretched or final. There are so many otherwise good prayers that I should like to re-write simply to expunge this sense of the ultimate seriousness of sin.¹⁴

There are, of course, many saints who have shown us the fallacy of taking ourselves too seriously. Francis of Assisi comes quickly to mind, with Filippo Neri and Thomas More not far behind. Yet one is tempted to venture further and ask for evidence of this spirituality of laughter in the gospels themselves.

The gospels are often regarded by their critics as humourless documents. It is true that there are few incidents that are traditionally

construed as humorous. Congregations are rarely moved to smile even when hearing the delightful story of Jesus' gentle teasing of Philip for not recognizing the Father.¹⁵ The fact is that Christian tradition has always regarded the New Testament (and the Old too for that matter) as a *tragedy*. That is to say a story about serious and important people written in a serious and portentous manner. Yet if Christ was really incarnate not as a King but as a carpenter's son, and if the climax of the story is the resurrection and not the passion, then we are really in the realm of *comedy*.¹⁶

Events in tragedies are traditionally governed by some Fate or other. Fates seem (mercifully) to show less concern over the Quinces and Bottoms of this world. Whatever the reason, there is some evidence that many of the things that occur during Jesus' ministry happen by chance. For instance the healing of the blind man at Siloe¹⁷—an important gospel because of its connections with the baptismal catechesis—takes place 'as Jesus was passing by'. We never anywhere get the impression that Jesus went out looking for people to heal. He did not feel, apparently, that healing was his duty. He did it simply when the opportunity presented itself. This vein, if followed through, may prove a mortal blow to those theologians who are forever attempting to see a finely worked out divine plan in every moment of Christ's life. Theologians are much too often guilty of taking a chance episode in the gospels or in later history and making it a necessary occurrence. They take, in other words, the gospel story and human history much too seriously. Moreover such a hermeneutic is not in accord with ordinary experience. How many 'important' decisions in human life are taken not because of a prearranged plan, but because of a chance occurrence or meeting? Marriage springs to mind here as a clear example, though there are many others in the realms of career and vocation. Historical examples range from the conversion of Constantine down to the election of John XXIII.

What is important in reading the gospels, then, is not so much what happened as the reason why it happened as it did. Not what Christ did, but the attitude that lay behind his doing it. And to discover this one needs, I think, to consider Christ's *spirituality*. The really important and serious moments in the gospels are those moments when Christ goes apart and prays. For surely the one thing that he (and we) could take with absolute seriousness is God himself, the Father, the reality behind all earthly things.

This recognition that prayer is the only really serious thing in the gospels brings us to the central point of our argument. Only if a man takes God with total seriousness can he begin to see how to laugh at the other lesser realities around him.

Prayer, then, or the contemplation of God *as God* must necessarily bring about the gift of laughter. Not the belly-laughter of the world, but rather the divine gift of seeing all things as gifts of God and there-

fore lovable, but nevertheless as less than ultimate and therefore laughable, unable to preoccupy a man totally. This is the laughter of the *Fioretti* and ultimately of the gospels.

From this perspective one can recognize that Christ's death was brought about by mankind's perennial tendency to take its religious and political games too seriously. Religious groups are, in the last analysis, games, bounded by their own rules and self-imposed limits. Christ involved himself with the Jewish religion, but not with so much seriousness that he could not laugh gently at it at certain points. One example is the light-heartedness with which he treated its complicated rules for being able to pull an ox out of a pit on the Sabbath. His close relationship with the Father (a relationship in which he included all Christians) meant that he saw even his own religious practices with laughter, recognizing that they were ultimately impotent to reveal the fullness of the Father's glory. He was consistently amazed to discover that men who had spent so much time in prayer as the Pharisees should be unable to see beyond the play-structures of Israel.

Nor is this critique in any way levelled at the Jews alone. Perhaps no other group in history has taken itself with such unwonted seriousness as the Christians. I well remember that when I was a spectator at Pope John's coronation, with its panoply of medieval pageantry, one of my friends leaned over to me and said: 'Close your eyes, and imagine that they are all totally naked'. Immediately I did so I began to see that I was involved in a game, which, like all games, had its lighter side. I cannot help but feel that John himself would have appreciated the thought.

Yet I would not wish to leave the impression that games, particularly religious games, are not to be taken seriously at all. If they are worthy of laughter, then they must be important indeed. The Incarnation is itself an assertion that men must continue to play their games of religion, culture and politics, and that these games have been sanctified by the fact that God himself took part in them. The important thing, once again, is not *which* games Jesus played among men, but *that* he played them, involved himself in them, but finally refused to take any one of them with absolute seriousness. The Jewish leaders felt that he was not taking their games with sufficient seriousness; the Romans felt the same, and so the death of Christ became inevitable.

To see the gospels in this light is to reveal a facet of their inner meaning which is too often lost. Christian spirituality today must come to grips with earthly reality, and yet it must never regard such reality as ultimate. In the world and yet not of it. In the sphere of ecumenical activity one can still detect the tendency among those committed to one denomination or another to take their own 'game' with almost absolute seriousness. If only our religious structures and denominational boundaries could be seen for what they are, then perhaps Christians could laugh together once again. But for this there is

required not only a new atmosphere in theological and ecclesiastical circles, but also an upsurge of genuine Christian mysticism at all levels. Only if Christians share their experience of God and Christ as the absolute reality can they agree to differ in their manner of expressing such an experience. The experience is so much beyond its expression that one can smile gently at the latter's impotence, and yet go on accepting it in the knowledge that it has its own limited importance in human affairs.

What I have tried to sketch in these few paragraphs can be of necessity only a broad general outline of a painting that needs to be filled in with many further details of shade and texture. Yet it is conceivable that we have here an element that, while making little difference to the substance of doctrines and dogmas that we have come to regard as Christian and Catholic, will shed a new light on their context, and therefore their interpretation. To be able to see the boundaries of our religious playing fields means to understand the real meaning of what goes on within them. It was, I would submit, a realization on Jesus' part that his persecutors were unable to see beyond their self-imposed boundaries that gave rise to his final poignant and earth-shattering utterance: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'.¹⁸

¹A paper presented at a seminar on Christian Ethics Today at McGill University, Montréal, in February 1970.

²Among other things are included: 'free time, time at one's disposal'.

³E.g. *Leisure, a Suburban Study* by George Lundberg et al. (Columbia 1934); *Mass Leisure* by Larrabee and Meyersohn (Glencoe, Illinois 1961); *Religion and Leisure in America*, by Robert Lee (New York 1964).

⁴This distinction is hinted at, though not directly applied, by Emile Rideau in his article 'Théologie de Loisir' (*Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 84, 1962, pp. 806-828).

⁵My favourite anthology of humour is still Pierre Daninos' *Tout l'Humour du Monde* (Paris 1958).

⁶Proverbs. 8/22-31.

⁷*Homo Ludens: a study of the play-element in culture* (trans. R. F. C. Hull), London 1970.

⁸London 1922 (republished in paperback 1968). The antithesis of Babbitt can also be found in a Sinclair Lewis novel, viz. *Elmer Gantry* (New York 1927, latest edition, London 1970).

⁹p. 7 (Signet edition).

¹⁰New York 1956. See especially pp. 11 ff.

¹¹From: *On the Margin: Notes and Essays*, London 1923.

¹²Arthur Miller, *The Bored and the Violent*, Harpers Magazine, November 1962, pp. 51ff.

¹³Cf. John. 17/6-19. The same theme is reiterated in John's first letter. Paul uses the same idea in Gal. 6/14. It is also very common in the early Fathers.

¹⁴The clearest and best-known example of this is in Thomas à Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*.

¹⁵John. 14/8-11. For more examples of possible humour in the gospels, see the little-known work of Jakob Jonsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament illustrated by parallels in the Talmud and Midrash* (Reykjavik 1965).

¹⁶Which, as the Concise Oxford Dictionary tells us, 'chiefly represents everyday life and with a happy ending'.

¹⁷John. 9/1-41.

¹⁸Luke. 23/34.