Comment: *Christian Laughter*

'Holy Books never laugh', Baudelaire wrote, in an essay on the nature of laughter and on the comic in the arts in general, 'no matter what nations they belong to'. In his relatively short life (he died in 1867 at the age of forty six, paralyzed for months by opium and alcohol) he had no more than a cursory acquaintance with anybody's sacred scriptures. A couple of years in India in his youth may have left 'something oriental in Baudelaire's genius', as Arthur Symons declared: 'a nostalgia that never left him after he had seen the East'; but we have no reason to believe that he ever had any serious knowledge of the literature of any of the ancient Indian religious traditions.

Yet it seems a pretty incontestable judgement, at first sight: nobody would turn to the Bible for a laugh. If the absence of humour is a defect, as Baudelaire is implying, we might reply that many other substantial bodies of literature which have no particular religious connections are equally not noted for side-splitting comedy — *Beowulf* or *The Tain* come to mind. Moreover, we might question the modern assumption, evidently shared by Baudelaire, that comedy is necessarily mirth-provoking. When Dante called his work *The Divine Comedy* he did so, not only because, contrary to tragedy, it has a happy ending (so does Virgil's work, which Dante nevertheless reads as a 'tragedy'); he did so mainly because the style is 'unstudied and lowly', in the kind of common speech 'in which even women-folk converse' (see Dante's *Letters* X). Again, there is often more rumbustious fun and exchange of wit in Shakespeare's tragedies than in his comedies, which undermines any hard and fast distinction between comedy and tragedy. Socrates, after all, at the end of Plato's *Symposium*, was maintaining that the knowledge required for writing comedy and tragedy was the same, though by then his companions were too drunk and drowsy to follow his argument.

However all that may be, readers are beginning to notice the funny side of some at least of the books that make up the Bible. Jewish readers are perhaps ahead in this respect (see Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner, editors, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1990). Yet, since Northrop Frye's pioneering work (like *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, 1982), Christian readers too have become aware of the potential of comedy as an illuminating perspective in which to approach certain biblical texts. Now, in *The Bible and the comic vision* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), J. William Whedbee, professor of biblical literature and history at Pomona College, California, has undertaken the most comprehensive study so far

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01725.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

of comedy in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Comedy, for Whedbee, involves four elements: humiliation for the hero but all ending happily (carnival, not catastrophe as in tragedy); a plot abounding with tricksters, simpletons and clowns; language that favours punning, parody, hyperbole and irony; and the upshot, ambivalently, both celebrating the status quo and anticipating utopian liberation. With these criteria, he takes us through the 'Comedy of Creation' (Gen. 1-11); 'Israel's Fathers and Mothers as comic figures' (Gen. 12-50); Exodus and Esther as 'comedies of deliverance'; Jonah as 'Joke'; the interplay between tragedy and 'comic faith' in the Book of Job; and, finally, 'Paradox and parody in the Song of Songs'.

The main point throughout is that, by oscillating between distancing mockery and celebratory mirth, these particular sacred writings take comedy on board as a strategy of overcoming death by revelling in life. Job, in the story, refuses to deny his innocence, as his comforters advise; but when he is allowed to see creation as a ludicrous parade of bizarre animals he comes to accept and affirm the mystery and incongruity at the centre of the universe. In effect, Job's concern with justice is embraced in a God's eye view of the universe *before* humanity, even beyond good and evil — a perspective which puts all things human into perspective.

Well, perhaps. Professor Whedbee does not venture into the Christian Bible — 'that poses another question and demands another book'. *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (The Penguin Press, 1997), by Michael Screech, Renaissance scholar (books about Erasmus, Rabelais and Montaigne), and (late in life) Anglican priest, doesn't quite fit the bill: astonishingly learned, highly entertaining, it certainly demonstrates the existence of 'Christian laughter', and its dependence on some of the most sacred scenes in the gospels. The most liberating jokes are, after all, the ones at the expense of things that we hold most dear (as, for instance, religion or oneself). But the history of how sayings and scenes in the gospels have provoked jokes is one thing; it would take another sort of book to explore the possibility that the gospels themselves have all along embodied something like the comic vision in Whedbee's sense. Composed as they no doubt were in the light of faith in the Resurrection of Christ, they should invite us to focus, finally, not on the humiliated figure of the Crucified but on 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor.4 :6). The Book of Job, as Karl Barth liked to say, is a kind of anticipation of the story of Jesus (*Church Dogmatics* IV/3). But why is it hard enough for Christians not to regard the story of Jesus simply as a tragedy, without having to try to think of it as a divine *comedy*?

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb01725.x Published online by Cambridge University Press