
Mapping the Theo-Comical Territory

*Humor is, in fact, a prelude to faith;
and laughter is the beginning of prayer.*

—REINHOLD NIEBUHR¹

It is widely understood that it is futile to attempt to explain a joke to someone who does not get it. E. B. White's quip is often paraphrased in support: "Explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog; it can be done but the frog dies in the process."² Of course, those who see this as an over-generalization are probably right as sometimes explanations are necessary and successful, but it is still a useful point to make: explanations of humor are inherently difficult.

The difficulty involved in explaining specific instances of humor is not just due to *incidental factors*, such as the need to explain, for example, the double meaning of words or the cultural assumptions of certain people. It is actually directly connected to the less widely known *theoretical principle*, on which virtually all philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and other theorists of humor agree, that there has never been any completely satisfactory overall, theoretical definition of humor. Humor is, in

1. Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs*, 111.

2. The proper quote is "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." White and White, *A Subtreasury of American Humor*, xvii. And the point about humor that is being made is not undermined, as it has been claimed, by the very earnest, technically correct, and somewhat humorless observation that the analogy is flawed because frogs are already dead before scientific dissection takes place.

principle, a somewhat elusive quality of life and while one cannot definitively rule out the possible development of some future theory that would comprehensively explain humor, it seems (given the attention that has already been paid to it) that it is not unreasonable to assume that humor has a fundamentally inexplicable dimension to it, similar to the fundamental uncertainty involved in quantum mechanics with regard to the simultaneous knowledge of both position and momentum of a specific particle. The uncertainty principle asserts that the more precisely one knows one of them then one necessarily knows less about the other. This indeterminacy is not the result of the considerable practical difficulties involved in measuring these properties but a theoretical uncertainty that can never be overcome (though it is a characteristic that can be used to advantage). As Gerald Bessière notes with regard to humor, "Humor has never allowed itself to be confined within a definition. It has always treated itself with humor."³ Indeed, the closer one comes to defining the characteristics of humor the less funny it all is. Humor, it seems, requires a certain mystery and a degree of absurdity for its very existence.

Consider the fact that if one had a definitive, scientifically valid theory of humor in general then it would be possible to use that theory to predict certain outcomes in the application of humor. That is, one could know for certain, given knowledge of the circumstances, whether a joke would be seen as funny by particular people. One would know whether a certain quip would cause offense and whether a specific comment would be seen as ironic rather than as simply insulting. As it is, no one can do this with certainty. Some humorists obviously have a better sense of this than others but no one is right all the time. The reader may consider for themselves whether they think that such knowledge will ever be possible. As for myself I doubt that it will happen, and after saying as much as I believe needs be said about humor theologically in this volume, I may write a science fiction novel about humor in a world where, after much scientific research a theory is developed which can infallibly understand the thought processes and intentions behind all ironic, witty, and humorous comments and know with certainty what will, and will not, amuse (or depress, frustrate, or anger) people. It would be interesting to explore the ramifications of this and it might well explain the benefits involved in humor actually being an elusive phenomenon! Indeed, it will be shown later that this mysterious element has a distinctly theological dimension to it. Not that all theology

3. Bessière, "Humour," 81.

is mysterious or paradoxical—there is much that is theological which is plain and straightforward—but Christian theology, founded as it is on the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection of Christ, is nonetheless deeply permeated with the mystery of God become man, the paradox of the death of the divine, and the promise of resurrection life.

What follows now are seven preliminary distinctions that will refine our understanding of humor because although it has been argued that precise and comprehensive definition is unlikely this does not mean that the concept cannot be more helpfully known by a process of clarification.

Humor as comedy rather than tragedy

Dante completed his epic narrative poem about a journey through purgatory, hell, and heaven, originally called simply *Comedia*, around 1320. For obvious reasons related to the content the title subsequently attracted the additional adjective, *Divine*, which, in the modern era is more easily understood as part of the title than “comedy,” because there seems to be very little that is funny about a serious discussion of hell. But the point becomes clear when it is noted that in the fourteenth century “comedy” referred to (a) dramatic writings in the vernacular—the ordinary, daily language of life (rather than in classical Latin which, being somewhat removed from the hurly-burly of everyday life, was considered better suited for serious themes), which (b) finished well, with joy and laughter. If it did not—if it finished badly—then it was a tragedy. Humor does, indeed, belong to everyday life (it is often very “common” or even crude) and it always finishes well, so that all may laugh. In humor as in eschatology it is the finish that is important. The process of telling the story or the joke may not be humorous at all (although it can be) but if it finishes with a laugh then it is comedy (indeed, so much the better if the joyful ending comes as something of a surprise). Life can be like that. Dante’s account, written in Tuscan (which partly because of the influence of the *Divine Comedy* became the standard Italian language) is a common language and robust account of the Christian view of life’s destiny and as such it reflects the nature of the gospel story and the earthiness of the incarnation. But, crucially, it ends well, not with the laughter of trivial amusement or a temporary diversion but with the laughter that emerges from a joyful celebration of God’s final victory. It is a comic vision of the world, one that does not despair at the incongruities, the frailty and the sinfulness of humanity,

but which believes profoundly in God, eternal light and love, who will, one day, be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

The laughter of God in heaven is no trivial or light-weight amusement. Instead, it is the eternal, whole-hearted laughter of one who has not merely overcome the pretensions of those who have opposed his grace and love (“The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them”—Ps 2:4.) but who has instituted a new order of life (“They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” (Isa 35:10—see Rev 21:1–5). But it is not only the *ending* that is different; firm hope in God’s ultimate success influences *present* life as well. A “comedy” may well involve tragedy but the point is that disaster is not allowed to ultimately control life. In this way the book of Job is, in the classic sense, a comedy. In fact, it is also a comedy in the more modern sense of the word, but that is the subject of a later chapter.

The implication of this “comic” approach is that the story is able to embrace complex life patterns. The comic is playful as well as serious and not fixated, as tragic figures often are, on single perceptions of life. Comedy can cope with (and laugh at) ambiguity and complexity, and can have open endings. In classical tragedy these fixations (on duty, revenge, self-pity or power) lead people with dreadful certainty towards their self-imposed fate. The comic, who can laugh at all things—sometimes even the apparently tragic—may appear to have become unnaturally detached from socially correct and psychologically appropriate feelings, but this specific, humorous form of detachment is actually the result of a clearer picture of the incongruities and frailty of human life and of the faithfulness of God. The true comic is not just playing everything for easy laughs but is, much more seriously, the one who knows the God of the future. A genuinely comic view of life includes (a) an understanding that laughter in times of sadness, such as bereavement, is not inappropriate and is often helpful; (b) a somewhat ironic view of social and political life, not believing that everything depends on the results of the next election or the behavior of politicians or other important people; (c) an attitude that avoids over-seriousness and any fixation that make it impossible to laugh at oneself. In theological terms the comic view of life is an act of faith.

Humor as ancient and modern

The main point of the previous discussion concerns the fundamentally comic dimension of life, but it also demonstrates the way in which the meaning of words and concepts changes over time. One has to avoid reducing the language and thought of the past to the conventions and theories of the present. A major issue is that “comedy” in common contemporary thought, more than was previously the case, relates to a much less consequential and much more specific phenomenon relating to being amused. Certain other aspects of the more ancient understandings of laughter and humor will be discussed later but it should be noted at this point that as far as the English language is concerned that prior to the eighteenth century the word “humor” (or “humour”) did not mean “funny.” Consequently, earlier discussions of that which is amusing tended to focus upon laughter⁴ while the concept of humor was used more broadly, concerning what we would call temperament. This was derived from the father of medicine, Hippocrates (c. 460–370 BC), who held that a balance between four humors or bodily fluids (blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile) was responsible for good health. This was foundational for ancient medicine. Later, Galen (c. 130–200 BC) developed humoral theory by suggesting that there are four basic temperaments (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic) associated with these humors and an excess or deficiency of one or other would cause, for example, irritability, anger, or depression. Humoral theory thus connects the physical with the psychological, though one should not race too far ahead and infuse it with all the assumptions and the conclusions of modern psychology. The ancient meaning of humor as a reference to bodily fluids and their related temperament was still prominent in 1598 when the English playwright Ben Jonson produced his well-known comedy *Every Man in His Humour*, in which every character is dominated by one or other of the humors such that, as Jonson said, “it doth draw all his affects, spirits, and his powers, in their confluents, all to run one way, this may be truly said to be a humour.”⁵ Characters are stereotypically strict, witty, flippant, pretentious, and so forth. The meaning of humor only began to change with this closer connection between humor and the way that exaggerated humors can be amusing, beginning around the time of Jonson’s comedy.

4. Morreall, “Philosophy and Religion,” 211.

5. Jonson, *Every Man in His Humour*, 103–9.

The essential point here is the need to be aware of the historical context of humor theory and practice. There is, for example, a growth in understanding of the relationship between humorous event and underlying temperament. Humor will never be understood solely in terms of events, words, and actions—it is as much a quality of the person who has, in some form or another, “a sense of humor”—and our understanding of this has changed over time. In modern Western thought humor has been psychologized—primarily understood in terms of psychological categories and this has been both incredibly insightful and, at the same time, potentially limiting.

Humor as cultural and universal

Humor is undoubtedly both universal and significantly influenced in its specific form by culture. Cultural factors include the influence of gender, family relationships, and social expectations. Research in Western culture has produced conflicting evidence on gender differences in humor, although a majority of studies support the notion of there being a difference. Many aspects of humor are consistent for males and females but (a) there are differences regarding attitudes to humor about gender differences; (b) there appears to be a greater female appreciation of nonsense or absurd humor; (c) men are more likely to utilize aggressive humor; and (d) women are more likely to employ self-deprecation, understatement, and irony.⁶

In regard to family relationships one of the primary questions concerns who one can appropriately joke with and what topics are suitable. Acceptable and non-acceptable joking relationships vary with culture, and research on non-industrial societies shows this is influenced by the nature of the relationship, marriage customs, sexual taboos, and the level of intimacy involved. On the one hand it may be completely inappropriate to joke either at all or in regard to certain topics with specific categories of relative while, on the other hand, certain relationships may involve very specific possibilities for humor (such as the possibility of occasions where one may appropriately and humorously throw excrement at certain cousins).⁷ Outside family relationships the level of friendship is the most important

6. The issue may sometimes be influenced by a degree of gender bias in the research methods employed where studies utilize humor created by males, or lack equal numbers of male and females. Roedckelein, *The Psychology of Humor*, 238–39.

7. Palmer, *Taking Humor Seriously*, 13.

prerequisite for establishing a joking relationship. In industrial societies family relationships are important but social and professional groupings are also significant regulators of appropriate humor.⁸ The form humor takes is also an important determinant of social acceptability. Humorous, rather than offensive, intent is frequently signaled by phrases such as, “Did you hear the one about . . .” Indeed, the joke has been an informal definition of humor. In a very loose, popular way humor is defined as telling jokes. This is seen in some responses to the admission that one is writing a book about humor—some are confused and wonder why a theologian is writing a joke book. The joke—in its various forms (riddle, pun, knock-knock, shaggy-dog story, punch-line jokes, etc.)—is certainly cultural in form and will go through various trends and cycles.

These and other factors are part of overall cultural approaches to humor. In general, Western culture perceives humor as a natural feature of life and a positive disposition that is widely possessed. It is reckoned to enhance health, promote creativity, strengthen coping, encourage self-actualization, and enhance social relationships. Those with a sense of humor are seen as positive and attractive in both social and work-related contexts. Those who lack a sense of humor are seen more negatively. By contrast, Chinese culture views humor as a more controversial disposition in social interactions and possessed (largely) by specialists in humor. This is related to the Confucian tradition, which encourages restraint in laughter to demonstrate dignity and social formality. Moderation in laughter, as in all things, is expected because it expresses extreme emotion and one has to be serious to be respected. Confucian concerns for maintaining proper social order and hierarchy means that humor is only appropriate at certain times, in conjunction with certain subjects, and only with certain people. A modest smile is preferred to hilarious laughter.

Cultural variations in regard to humor can produce confusing issues in translation and cross-cultural understanding. Languages and cultures do not all categorize humor in the same way and so one has to be wary. Freud’s notable *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* has “jokes”—translating *witz*—but it can also mean ingenuity or wit.⁹ Freud distinguishes *witz* from *scherz*, which can be jest or hoax, and given that the conceptual clarity of his threefold classification of humor into joke, comic, and mimetic forms is debated anyway, translation issues have the potential for making it less

8. Apte, *Humor and Laughter*, 65–66.

9. Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*, 6.

clear. The situation is by no means unique to Freud and, given that to some extent terminology creates understanding, rather than merely expressing it, care has to be taken in cultural interpretation.

This can be connected with Christian theological thought which, of course, is familiar with the difficulties involved in relating the universal and the culturally particular. It is not a general, abstract, theoretical philosophy, for God is known through specific incarnation as a Jewish male in what we now refer to as the first century. The knowledge of God and the knowledge of humanity are thus intimately tied together. One cannot understand human nature apart from the incarnate Christ. The universal aspect of human nature is only experienced and known specifically. It is not expressed other than through particular cultural form. In biblical terms the human person is primarily defined by the *imago dei*—a concept that far outweighs the brevity of scriptural references to it. It is a term that references both the created order (Gen 1:27) and the eschatological future involved in humanity being incorporated into Christ (Col 1:15–20; 3:10; 2 Cor 4:4; Jas 3:8–10; Eph 4:20–24; Heb 1:3). The universality of humor, as an essential aspect of the person, is connected with the *imago dei*. To be human is to be humorous and this humor is, along with all aspects of the person, to be redeemed and a part of the future eschatological life.

Humor as event and temperament

People often refer to a situation as being humorous but although there usually is some definable aspect of incongruity in the situation that leads to the humor the ultimate determinant of humor lies in the individual's perception: it is funny (or ironic, amusing, witty, and so forth) because they believe it to be so. The nature of the two dimensions of humor—that which lies in the situation and the perception of it—will be considered further later but it should be noted here that both need to be considered. Incongruity in the event is a necessary but not in itself a sufficient condition for humor.

The subjective dimension of humor is sometimes seen as an emotion. It has certainly been noted that humor, and especially laughter, has the effect of *blocking* emotions. One has to temporarily leave other feelings behind when one laughs with other people. Is this humorous experience something that blocks emotions or itself an emotion? Most commonly, humor has been described as a feeling or emotion, though some have seen it negatively (malice according to Plato, hatred according to Spinoza), and

others more positively (commonly as amusement or delight) or, sometimes, as an even more elusive emotion. Hobbes described it as “the passion that [hitherto] hath no name,” although he goes on to describe it as a form of joy arising from a sense of superiority (which is not exactly what is involved in genuine joy according to many other people). Wallace Chafe says that there is an underlying emotion, for which we have no agreed word though he sees it as a form of non-seriousness, not being earnest, a lightness of being which may produce laughter.¹⁰ The ancient notion of *eutrapelia* (used notably by Aristotle and Aquinas) to describe this feeling will, in a later chapter, be a useful resource.

The notion of humor specifically as an emotion rather than as, say, “a cognitive experience,” has been defended by Robert Sharpe, who notes seven similarities between humor and the emotions. Humor has, for example, a distinction between the subject and the object of their emotion, there are degrees of humor and emotion, and humor can be cultivated, just as one can learn to love someone.¹¹ But the notion of humor as an emotion has also been challenged by John Morreall, who observes that, unlike emotions, humor involves no set of beliefs or desires and produces no practical response. The physiological processes that take place do not, of themselves, demonstrate that humor is an emotion.¹² Whether technically an emotion or not (and there are both similarities and differences compared with the standard emotions) the subjective dimension of humor is a personal quality or attribute, a way of being, or as it is commonly said, a “sense” that one has. This perception is essential and also more mysterious, more difficult to explain, and it relates to the individual temperament of the person. What kind of sense of humor do they have? A comic temperament is one that is likely to more readily perceive the significance of life’s many incongruities. It is possible to temporarily be “in a good humor” but there is also an underlying temperament involving having “a sense of humor” of some kind that is characteristic of the person.

Theologically speaking, what is of interest here is not the temperament or sense of humor that treats every part of life as a joke, as a means of finding a pun, a laugh, or an appreciation from others—that is a mechanical, utilitarian approach to humor that does not, of itself, go to any depth in comprehending God, the world, oneself or others. Having a mature

10. Chafe, *The Importance of Not Being Earnest*, 1.

11. Sharpe, “Seven Reasons Why Amusement is an Emotion.”

12. Morreall, “Philosophy and Religion,” 235–46.

sense of humor does not mean being good at developing jokes, but rather is about having a particular approach to life. This may mean observing the unintended irony involved in certain political statements; being alert to satire; being able to find joy and laughter in the midst of the most difficult circumstances; being amused by the most simple daily situations in life; being provoked to action by the incongruity—and injustice—of certain events; being better able to understand and forgive the foibles and frailties of others. It does not mean not being serious about life but it does mean being more playful; it means coming closer to others through friendship and appreciation of others despite, and perhaps because, of shared humor; it means being appreciative, rather than despairing of the world; and, altogether it means understanding that, despite appearances to the contrary, joyfulness and not tragedy is the final outcome of all things. This temperament, this sense of humor, is part and parcel of the life of faith, hope, love, and especially joy.

Humor as mockery and joy

To some people it may be strange and confronting to say that humor involves both joy and mockery, but it is only our modern, culturally based view of humor and laughter that finds mockery to be not very funny. Some people definitely prefer humor to be nice and well-behaved; others prefer a more controversial approach and welcome humor that is prepared to really make fun of people although it is usually reckoned to be socially inappropriate to make fun of people on the basis of race or disability. Politicians and others figures usually reckoned to have power and prestige are, however, often considered fair game. But there are limits, even for politicians. Perhaps the exceptions are terrorists, although this immediately brings to mind the fact that the most controversial humor in recent years has focused upon humor directed at terrorists, or is it at their religion? Those objecting to various cartoons and satirical articles have not only been terrorists themselves but those who have interpreted the humor as an attack on the religion itself, which it may—or may not—have been.

God, however, has no compunction about mocking some people and laughing to scorn those who are wicked, both individuals (“the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming,” Ps 37:13) and nations (“But you laugh at them, Lord; you scoff at all those nations,” Ps 59:8). In the light of this how are we to assess whether there is humor in

Mary's song at the news that she was to bear a child by the Holy Spirit? The Magnificat of Luke 1:46–55 is a song of praise that glorifies the Lord for the great things he has done. It is often seen as a hymn of liberation because it stresses the way in which God does mighty deeds in scattering those who are proud and powerful. Would those who were under Roman rule who heard this hymn have laughed at the declaration that rulers would be brought down from their thrones and the humble lifted high? A theology of humor needs to take such things into account in understanding both divine and human humor.

Humor as amusement and wisdom

No definition of humor can avoid observing that humor is amusing, but it can also be the means of enabling significant insights into character, social situations, and politics. Discussions of humor from the seventeenth to the twentieth century typically distinguished between humor and wit, although the dividing line was not always clear-cut. Humor was more related to outright laughter and was more positive, more physical, more earthy, and more suited to the lower classes. Wit was more intellectual, more gentlemanly, sharper, and more challenging in its observations. Freud held this distinction and then added a third category of non-verbal slapstick, which he termed “the comic.” It is often assumed that it is intellectual wit which is the more able to impart wisdom but the effect of simpler forms of humor that are perhaps more physical than intellectual in orientation should not be overlooked. The physical responses to simpler forms of humor vary from vigorous belly-laughs through various more restrained forms of laughter and chuckling to assorted smiles and grins. There are also many occasions where no physical response is apparent. The more extreme forms of response actually sound like an illness. People temporarily lose control of their voice (they laugh involuntarily and sometimes can't stop, possibly embarrassing themselves), and may also uncontrollably twitch their head or arms or even their whole bodies, they may engage in a form of crying, may breathe abnormally heavily, and may need to sit down, as though in physical distress. It is possible to “laugh till it hurts.” And yet people enjoy it immensely.

Nonetheless, sometimes, indeed, perhaps frequently, there is little observable by way of physical response. But that does not mean that a person is not amused or that they do not find in the situation some absurdity,

incongruity, or insight that is not only amusing but which gives them a deeper understanding of some aspect of life. Comic situations can impart wisdom and understanding as well as amusement. While writing this I am watching the current series of the Australian satirical comedy *Utopia*, in which public servants in the fictitious National Building Authority are charged with developing projects to enhance the national infrastructure (“nation building—one white elephant at a time”). In the offices of the NBA office politics and incompetence challenge efficiency. The competent leaders of the organization, Tony and Nat are constantly thwarted by inefficiency, obsession with new systems that take more time than they are worth, office socialization, political interference, and sheer incompetence (often well meaning). If anything is achieved it is by the least competent. Even when one does not laugh out loud the comic situations—which are not always so outlandish that they cannot be believed—not only make it one of the funniest (and currently most awarded) programs but one that gives insight and understanding regarding human relationships, organizational structures, and political constraints. Humor is not only amusement, it can be a form of wisdom.

Even more significantly humor can be the means of imparting spiritual wisdom and insight. The extent, the nature and the use of humor in Scripture will be discussed more fully in a later chapter. So it will be sufficient here to note, as one example, that there are pedagogical similarities between the parables of Jesus and the humor of *Utopia*. The parables are their own literary form (just as much as a TV script) and the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23–35) similarly has droll humor that enables the communication of a serious message. The story begins with a king calling to account and threatening to imprison a man who owes him 10,000 talents. Now that is an amount that would make those listening to the parable stop and think about what was going on and how they might react, because that is an amount equivalent to 60 million days’ wages and it represents more money than there was in circulation in a sizeable country like Egypt in the first century.¹³ One can imagine the listeners grinning even before the story goes further, but it then has the desperate servant preposterously declaring, presumably with a straight face, “Be patient with me and I will pay back everything!” The parable is presenting a serious situation in a very comic form.

13. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, 92.

The king unexpectedly forgives the entire debt and releases the servant who immediately goes and demands repayment of a debt owed to him by another servant. The amount he is owed is trivial and stands in sharp contrast to the massive amount he has been forgiven, but despite that he is unable to show the same grace as the king and has the man who cannot pay him thrown into prison. Listeners would be aware of the irony involved here, would be likely to think “Yes, I know a *few* like that!” They may well then laugh heartily at the king’s subsequent judgement on the unforgiving servant—that he be imprisoned and tortured until he repays his massive debt—which, of course, would make that even more of an impossibility! Only after all this would the listeners realize that they have been led into a trap as their righteous laughter at the punishment of the unforgiving servant is turned back on themselves as Jesus draws out his intended message, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat *you* unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” One hopes that they can then laugh at themselves being impaled on Jesus’ teaching because if they are unable to do that then they will learn nothing about forgiveness. Gaining wisdom and insight without a sense of humor is difficult, if not impossible.

Humor as sinful and virtuous

While it will be strongly argued here that a good sense of humor is spiritually beneficial and theologically appropriate it must be recognized that certain forms and uses of humor are inappropriate and that some laughter is sinful. As it will be shown later, the Christian tradition has developed a long list of objections to humor. It has been seen as offensive, aggressive, excluding, irresponsible, hedonistic, mocking, undignified, frivolous, spiteful, madness, anarchic, unworthy of God, and foolish. Despite all this, humor and laughter should be seen as gifts from God. They are gifts that can be misused and abused but they are gifts nonetheless. The epistle of James points out that “out of the same mouth come praise and cursing” (3:10). Cursing is wrong but it does not detract from the goodness of the praise of God. The one who is wise should show wisdom by their good life and the way that they speak. So too with humor, people should demonstrate the moral benefits of humor rather than the morally unhelpful ones. Humor is, in fact, an important quality for those who wish to be spiritually mature. It may even be described as a virtue although not in quite the same way as other virtues, such as those described in Galatians

as the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control.

The difference lies in the way the virtues and other qualities are categorized. Kindness, for example, is, by definition always good. Humor, on the other hand, is not always morally right. However, the difference is not great, as it is simply the result of nomenclature because the qualities that produce kindness can also be distorted to produce that which is not good (for example, generosity and help shown to people who are known to use their resources to abuse others). In that case, however, such generosity would not be referred to as kindness and so that virtue escapes all blame for the action, whereas humor has to bear the opprobrium that comes from its misuse. The reality, however, is that *any* human quality can be perverted and in that regard humor is no different to kindness or the other virtues.

The real question then is whether humor is actually a good in itself, or whether it is only good as a means of achieving some other end such as wisdom, joy, or patience. It is argued here that there is a both/and relationship between virtue and humor. Humor is, on the one hand, an important means by which one can enhance the life of virtue generally. It is a disposition or quality of life that enables the exercise of virtues such as love, faith, and hope. On the other hand, humor is also a virtue in itself, not unlike the traditional four cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, courage, and prudence. These four virtues when combined with the three principal theological virtues of faith, hope, and love make up the seven heavenly virtues of Christian tradition. The categorization is somewhat arbitrary and should not be seen to separate these virtues from myriad other biblical and other virtues. If a virtue is simply a habitual and firm disposition to do good then one could, on the basis of biblical material alone, reckon there to be over a hundred.

The traditional reckoning that there are cardinal virtues as well as theological ones points to the fact that life is lived as a whole and that there are myriad qualities and dispositions that are necessary in order for one to demonstrate virtues such as faith, hope, and love. Hope may be enhanced by temperance or restraint, love in difficult circumstances may require courage, and faith may well need a good sense of justice to be kept strong. Similarly, there are many situations where humor is essential for a life of virtue. Indeed, although the tradition of the church has shockingly neglected it, humor is an essential part of the virtuous life. Life cannot be lived well without a sense of humor.

Although Scripture does not nominate humor as a virtue it is an important disposition and not merely in a utilitarian sense. In the Christian life means and ends are closely correlated and a sense of humor (being much more than the ability to make jokes) as part of one's attitude towards life not only enhances life in the present and contributes towards one's growth to maturity, it is an important dimension of one's ultimate relationship with others and with God. It is intimately connected with a joyfully lived life, it is an expression of hope that God is in control and will draw all things to himself, and it is part of the life of faith. Reinhold Niebuhr said that "humor is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer."¹⁴

SAMPLE

14. Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs*, 111.