Introduction

> Humor is one of the ways employed by the Hebrews (to adjust to life in a foreign culture). They take a word and by changing a letter give it a totally new sense. . . . They play on words in such a manner as to ridicule the text or person or to achieve a very different effect. . . . Thus the Hebrews are set in the midst of cultures: they do not shut themselves off from them, they know and use them but they make them say other things. This is the subversion of culture.
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> —Jacques Ellul
> *The Subversion of Christianity*

At the end of the nineteenth century, religion was still a dominant factor in our cultural worldviews. The Protestant majority, though uneasy at the wave of immigrants entering the country, was confident enough to refer to the approaching twentieth century as "The Christian Century." Traditional values still controlled our thinking, and there seemed little reason to believe that would change very quickly. If daily life was experiencing some "dis-ease" in urban centers, for the most part it was not threatening. Rooted in the past, the routines of living needed no explanation. There was a seamless web in social living that was seldom challenged by external circumstances. In general, society enjoyed a rhythm to life, a social harmony reflecting a sense of well-being in the culture.

When circumstances did threaten that fabric, they were usually given religious labels and interpreted accordingly. Natural catastrophes and personal losses were still viewed as acts of God and accepted as such. The culture was more than a way of life at this time. It had a past and, more importantly, it had a purpose shaped by that past. People had a sense of continuity and believed the future would be a natural unfolding of the nation's history. The idea of culture remained faithful to the assumption that people shared a common meaning and were shaped and motivated by it in daily living.

But culture cannot thrive on such a limited, albeit positive view of the world. In addition to an enabling meaning and purpose, culture requires boundaries which limit and channel human initiative. Whether we think of culture expressed as art, religion, politics or even everyday life, we understand there is a certain order there that provides us with a stable, unified view of the world. Restraint is part of that order which must balance freedom if a culture is to maintain the orderliness which is part of its definition. We could say a culture enjoys "good health" when people share that orderliness merging freedom and restraint which shapes the national character.

By the mid-twentieth century, a subtle change in thinking reflected a certain dis-ease encroaching on the culture. In one of the most influential books of the century, David Riesman's "study of the changing American character" pointed to the rise of a new social character in conflict with the old.[1] The changes occurring in human relationships were molding the culture in unpredictable ways. People were gripped by a new anxiety that the culture had irrevocably changed. Two decades later, Alvin Toffler picked up this theme in his revolutionary study of the technological revolution.[2] Looking to the future rather than to the past, he took the public's eyes off Vietnam and directed them to the explosive changes straining the cultural foundation.

Other cultural critics pointed to a variety of erosive forces in American society. Christopher Lasch saw narcissism as a cultural phenomenon which devalued the past and limited the culture's capacity to face the future.[3] Others noted the changes taking place in America's religious scene and, explicitly or implicitly, pointed to secularizing trends.[4] The celebrated work by Robert Bellah and his associates underscored the cultural conflict between our need for community and the individualism promoted by modern life.[5] This conflict, symptomatic of the cultural disorder of our time, was no longer questioned at the end of the century. It was with that understanding that James Davison Hunter could confi-

1. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*.
2. Toffler, *Future Shock*.
3. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*.
4. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* and Eck, *A New Religious America*.
5. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart*.

dently write about the "culture wars" and the forces shaping them.[6] And so the discussion continues.

We have now moved beyond our earlier naivete and no longer assume that culture is neatly structured and cohesive. In the last half century or so, it has become apparent that erosive rather than integrative factors are having a greater influence on American culture. The Sixties, especially, highlighted some of those forces subverting culture as we knew it. Since then, more benign forms of radical change have put traditional values at risk. It is for that reason Christopher Lasch could "describe the United States as a 'cultureless society.'"[7] Culture may now refer not to refined tastes and expressions but to the fact that the traditional expectations which defined our culture no longer exist. Worse, nothing has successfully replaced those expectations to provide cultural cohesion and structure.

This book is an attempt to come to grips with the problem of a fragmented and often dissolute culture. It suggests that humor has been a subtle but potent force in the changing of American culture in the last century. Initially, it contributed to our sense of national identity and cultural awareness. More recent forms of humor, however, have been subverting that culture, largely by introducing new expectations devoid of moral meaning as we have known it. Precisely because humor is associated with benign, healing qualities, its negative influence has been ignored or not understood. This other, erosive influence of humor is a major concern of the book.

Ellul's description of the use of humor in ancient Israel draws a parallel for us today. We experience rapid social change as foreign cultures that buffet us with conflicting demands. Like the Hebrews, we are caught in this change and cannot escape it. And like the Hebrews, we use humor as a palliative. Language, which has provided so much of the meaning of our culture, now undergoes new and creative uses. We play with words and images as the Hebrews did and, as a result, alter the meaning of the world we live in. Consequently, much that had a serious meaning is trivialized and rendered insignificant.

With Ellul's work as a foundation, this book proceeds with three basic assumptions:

6. Hunter, *Culture Wars*.
7. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*.

1. that humor, as we use it today, has gained greater cultural importance while negatively influencing culture during the last century,
2. that orthodox religion has been changing while losing its traditional meaning in the culture,
3. that there is a connection between these two trends.

Much of orthodox religion, like the Hebrew faith, was based on a "God's-eye view of the world." In everyday life, religious faith bound people together and gave them purpose and direction as they tried to interpret life from God's point of view. When that interpretation was threatened by some personal or cultural crisis, religion and its traditional answers were often challenged. At such times, religion could offer renewed hope by providing a new sense of "good humor" that countered the forces of evil threatening people and their cultural assumptions.

But when means other than religion are used to adjust to cultural crises, as was the case with the Hebrews, the culture is gradually subverted. One way to deal with crises is to deny their seriousness. Like the Hebrews, we can "ridicule the text or person" to gain the effect we desire. Rather than responding to a foreign culture with faith, the Hebrews made fun of it. Today, we also use humor to question a serious view of the world and use the cultures about us to "make them say other things" about the traditional meanings of our social experiences. At such times, faith may be replaced by other social expressions which ease the adjustment to cultural crises.

No doubt humor has always provided a cultural prop to adjust to difficult social changes. But this use of humor has been especially used and often abused in the twentieth century because of three major cultural trends:

1. the increased importance of paradox in culture
2. the increased importance of therapeutic thinking
3. the decreased importance of the traditional meaning of language

The book argues that each of these trends may be countered by religious faith or cultural humor. When the culture is enriched with a godly view of the world, crises may be countered with faith. But when this view is weakened, a more secular response will rely on some cultural form of

humor to respond to crisis. Humor is not one-dimensional; it has a multitude of meanings which may be used to respond to different forms of crisis. Holocaust humor (more commonly referred to as "ghetto humor"), for example, was used as a survival device in German concentration camps.[8] Comedy, however, is "the ultimate civilizer in a dull, insensitive world" and is widely used as a means of adjusting to conditions of modern living.[9]

"Fun" is the form of humor that flourishes in an increasingly secularized society because it meets many of the needs of such a society. Since the eighteenth century, the meaning of fun has moved from a negative connotation of foolishness to its current positive usage to connote escape or freedom. At first this escape was from the boredom and tediousness of daily living. But the term gradually came to justify any escape from chafing expectations. As this meaning of fun gained popularity, it became part of the tool kit offered by culture to cope with modern life. And in the process, fun became a substitute for faith.

This last point is important since it places humor in the debate concerning the place of secularization in modern society. There is a majority of scholars who believe secularization is no longer a force in the modern world. Indeed, they point to emerging forms of religious expression as testimony that religion is still important to people and influences their thinking and behavior. Others who are probably in the minority use more orthodox forms of belief and practice as benchmarks to measure religious change. For them, secularization is an ongoing process that continues to challenge and erode traditional religious meaning in the world.

How one interprets these two conflicting points of view largely depends on the meaning of religion that is used. If religion is defined as a response to whatever one considers to be meaningful in life, then the former group is probably correct; new religions form as we respond with hope and enthusiasm to sports, political programs, or even body building regimens. But if religion is defined more narrowly to refer only to a response to a transcendent God, then the latter group has a stronger claim. Religion, then, is more clearly understood as a faith which places its trust outside human and cultural influences and secularization involves the erosion of that faith. While the issues here are important for academic debate, they are less relevant for our interests which are more concerned

8. See, for example, Oster, "Holocaust Humor."

9. Sypher, *Comedy*, IX.

with humor as a powerful cultural force which should be taken more seriously than it is.

The book opens with God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son in their old age. Faced with this paradox, they respond to God's promise with laughter instead of faith. The importance of paradox in modern life is developed in Chapter Two which emphasizes the roles played by religion and humor in responding to paradox. Chapter Three describes humor as a "technique" that is used to gain something while masking possible negative consequences. We also learn that humor, paradoxically, may support a culture at the same time that it subverts it.

Chapters Four and Five turn to the Bible and Jewish life for an understanding of the religious meaning of humor. Since there is a dialectic of the sacred and the comic in religion, there is always a hint of redemption in the comic. Laughter may then become a sign of spiritual victory. Jews, for example, accept laughter as a gift to help them interpret the paradox of their spiritual journey and to experience joy in it.

Religion is developed in Chapter Six as part of the shift to therapeutic thinking in the mid-twentieth century. The resulting "therapeutic culture" harbors a transition from restrictive to permissive thinking, from a traditional culture of restraint to a modern culture of freedom. Chapter Seven introduces fun as a critical element in this new way of thinking. Problems may appear more illusory than real when interpreted by fun and deviance, when masked by fun, may lead to social disorder. Chapters Eight and Nine present fun as functional for both society and religion and identify a sacred element in fun which suggests a transcendent quality in life. But transcendence is less apparent in a secularized society and Chapter Ten warns of the greater likelihood that fun will become a new form of faith in the modern world. Chapter Eleven offers a critique of fun as we experience it today.

With this critique as a basis, the book concludes on a positive note. The more we understand fun and how it influences modern thinking, the more likely we are to take it seriously and the more seriously it is taken, the more likely it will be resisted. The more likely, too, that we can separate cultural fun from other forms of humor in our understanding. Then, perhaps, the relation between religion and humor will become clearer and we can appreciate how faith becomes fun or, if you will, how fun becomes faith.