

BOOK REVIEWS

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REDEEMING LAUGHTER: THE COMIC DIMENSION OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE. By Peter L. Berger. New York, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997. xvii + 215 pp. Cloth, \$23.95.

The number of studies on humor in the human sciences has increased considerably over the last decades. Old questions resurface along side new ones concerning the definition, mechanism, and functions of humor as well as the relationship between humor and other human concerns, including ethics, esthetics, and religion as well as such applied matters as health, media, and work. There is a great diversity of views among scholars in this area, but they have at least one attitude in common: an appreciative if not even eulogistic perspective on the comic.

Redeeming Laughter confirms this general tendency: the book constitutes a real *Eloge du comique*. Taking an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates theories from philosophy, psychology, and sociology, Peter Berger praises the comic as constituting an important, even vital, dimension of human existence. To support his thesis, he examines forms of the comic as varied as wit, tragicomedy, benign humor, and satire, and explores jokes from a variety of different cultures (including Jewish humor) and religious contexts (e.g., Luther's humor as well as humor in the Zen tradition).

Berger is not the first to suggest that humor is integral to the human condition. His main contribution in this book lies, rather, in his argument that humor's importance derives from the redeeming dimension of laughter, a view that he supports through a variety of disciplines and fields. The second great merit of this book — and what is perhaps more interesting to religious studies scholars — lies in the theological implications that Berger draws from his theoretical elaborations on humor as well as the multiple connections he establishes between the comic and the sacred.

His method, unfortunately for the reviewer, may be qualified as "baroque," as the author himself warns the reader in the introduction, because of the multitude of fields, theories, sources, types of comic, and parenthetical remarks he introduces. However, hidden connections among the chapters of this book provide a consistent thread for the reader.

The comic, Berger reminds us, is a specifically human experience, unlike similar experiences, such as play, that are also possible for animals. Further, Berger privileges a cognitive definition of the comic as the perception of funniness; this cognitive dimension incorporates not only cognitive incongruity, as discussed in recent psychology of humor, but also the existential experience of reality.

Berger adopts Schutz's distinction between the "paramount reality," the compelling reality of ordinary everyday life, and the "finite provinces of meaning," or what William James called "subuniverses," which are islands of experiences that occur when the individual

temporarily "emigrates" from the paramount reality. Humor is one of these finite provinces of meaning, along with dreams, esthetic experiences, sexuality, and play, each of which has its own cognitive style and "exclusive sense of reality" (7–8). Much like play, humor is an interlude, an intermezzo, in serious everyday life. In this sense, the comic is an intrusion into everyday life and remains beyond the questions of truth and morality.

The investigation of a variety of theories from the human sciences allows the author to substantiate his assumptions. The comic has a Dionysian, ecstatic, and subversive character. Perhaps cathartic like tragedy, it is at the same time more abstract, allowing for a painless contemplation of discrepant aspects of life. The comic is a glorification of the incongruous, a term that Berger notes can be understood in different ways: incongruity between life and matter (Bergson) or between body and mind (Plessner); a disappointment of an expectation (Kant); a contradiction between finite and infinite (Kierkegaard); and finally, a discrepancy between human subjectivity and the substance of reality (Hegel). Furthermore, says Berger, the comic is the experience not only of the relative character of this reality but also of something "objectively out there in the world" (34). The comic conjures up a separate world, a counterworld, in which the limitations of the human condition are overcome.

Of particular interest are Berger's reflections on the relationship between religion and comic experience. Berger is fully aware of the lack of humor in the Christian tradition and of the negative attitude toward laughter in biblical, patristic, and medieval texts. Thus he avoids the mistake often made by scholars who, anxious to create a discourse favorable to realities once repressed by religion (e.g., humor, sexuality, dreams), overinterpret and distort ancient religious texts in order to make them congruent with more modern theological or religious ideas.

Berger argues that if the comic belongs to the "finite provinces of meaning," and if it reflects, consequently, a counterworld and thus the possibility of overcoming the limitations of the human condition, it has a function similar to religion. Both constitute an intrusion into the reality of everyday life, and therefore both threaten the established order. That is why they are both domesticated in ritual. The comic, as demonstrated through medieval carnivals, liberates or at least temporarily defeats fear, notably the fear of death. Both are also related to the absurd and to folly, a conclusion based largely (if also problematically) on the example of "holy fools" in many religions.

Finally, it is argued in this book that the comic conjures up a counterworld with its own rules, a world to which human beings may temporarily escape. More precisely, neither the comic nor religion transforms the world in its empirical reality; they are sacramental, not magical. Laughter turns out to be redeeming and to constitute "a signal of transcendence." It transcends the reality of ordinary life, including its tragic

dimension, and posits a different reality in which ordinary assumptions and rules are suspended.

However, if on one level humor shares with religion this redeeming quality, one should not assume that this quality of humor is specifically or necessarily religious. In the final and perhaps most original part of the book, Berger argues that laughter may be — not necessarily, but as an act of faith — a signal of religious faith. This faith is equivalent to the intuition that the promise of redemption made by laughter will be kept. If the comic in a non-religious framework is a finite and temporary game with the experience of seriousness, pain, and death in this world, "faith puts the empirical in question and denies its ultimate seriousness" (210).

In drawing these implications of the comic, Berger writes as a theologian. From such a perspective, his point of view is original, exciting, and yet still "orthodox." One can argue that if the human condition reflects God, it may be expected that humor and laughter, as specific dimensions of human existence, reflect and are a signal of transcendence.

However, some criticism may arise, if not from a theological perspective (e.g., objecting to the accentuation of the ecstatic aspect of religion), then at least from a religious studies perspective and notably also from a psychological one. First, one could question the assumption that the difference between the comic and faith lies in the fact that the comic experience is a promise of redemption whereas faith is the intuition that the promise will be kept. Laughter may question or unmask the limits of the paramount reality, but it does not posit, as Berger thinks, "something objectively out there in the world." That is what religion does and that may explain why, from an empirical perspective, one could hypothesize that for reasons inherent to their "essences," religion is not so compatible with humor.

One could also raise doubts about the possibility of reconciling such an optimistic conception as Berger's with the historically well-established reality of humorless theology and religion. Irrespective of the answer to the question of whether Jesus ever laughed, the fact is that for almost two thousands years people have believed that He did not.

It is perhaps possible to investigate empirically Berger's theological conclusion that the comic is a signal of transcendence for people who have, not the conviction, but only the intuition that the promise will be kept. However, can we be sure that when testing for this hypothesis we will not be confronted with the same problem Kohlberg faced when he tried to find people corresponding to his seventh, final stage of moral development?

Leaving these doubts aside, one has to recognize that this original book by an eminent sociologist constitutes at the same time an admirable panorama of humor theories, a serious interdisciplinary defense of the comic as redemptive, and a provocative theological interpretation of laughter as a signal of transcendence. It is also one of the very few books where humor — and consequently ritualized aggression — is not confined to the footnotes.

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WOMEN IN NEW RELIGIONS: IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY, SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUAL POWER. By Elizabeth Puttick. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1997. 282 pp., 49.95, cloth, 18.95, paper.

The proliferation of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in the 1960s and 1970s led to the development of a field of research within the sociology of religion that focused primarily on the social function of NRMs among a generation of women and men who were seeking alternatives to mainstream religious organizations. As these movements grew in number, attracting mainly white, middle-class devotees, a corresponding anti-cult movement also emerged, charging alternative religious groups with brain washing, excesses, and abuse. As questions of ethics and violence in NRMs began to surface, sociologists of religion found themselves grappling with issues of religious freedom, the demonization of non-mainstream religious groups, and the reality of criminal activity among movements that had offered the promise of an enlightened worldview.

Some 20 years later, in the aftermath of numerous sexual and financial scandals and the tragedy at Waco, Texas, Elizabeth Puttick, a sociologist and former member of the movement led by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, has written a comprehensive text on women in new religious movements. Drawing on the existing literature in this area as well as her own research among former devotees, she has amassed an extensive body of data that examines the master-disciple relationship, abusive power relations, motherhood, and gender roles in a number of different movements, including Osho and the Children of God. As a former devotee of Bhagwan (who later became known as Osho), her analysis focuses mainly on the Osho movement, situating the followers of Bhagwan within a larger framework of women in alternative religious groups.

Puttick's analysis begins with an informative description of the history, growth, and demise of the Osho movement. Following this introductory chapter, she presents a lengthy discussion of gender and the abuse of power within new religious movements. Here she examines the guru-disciple relationship, the ideology of surrender, and the exploitation of woman within alternative religions. Her discussion centers on female prostitution in the Christian-based movement, the Children of God, and the demands for sexual service from female devotees in Eastern-based movements.

Puttick's discussion of female sexuality raises important philosophical questions concerning the notion of surrender within religious groups and the context within which the notion of enlightenment becomes gendered. While the book considers the ways in which women may be empowered through sexual relations with powerful leaders, the analysis is weighed more heavily toward the potential for abuse and exploitation that such relationships create.

Puttick next examines the concept of devotion and the use of sexual metaphor in the act of surrender. Elaborating specifically on the Osho movement, she discusses Bhagwan's references to sexual surrender and his use of the Jungian principles of the masculine and feminine self to guide his disciples toward enlightenment. In particular, Bhagwan disdained feminism among his female followers, suggesting that